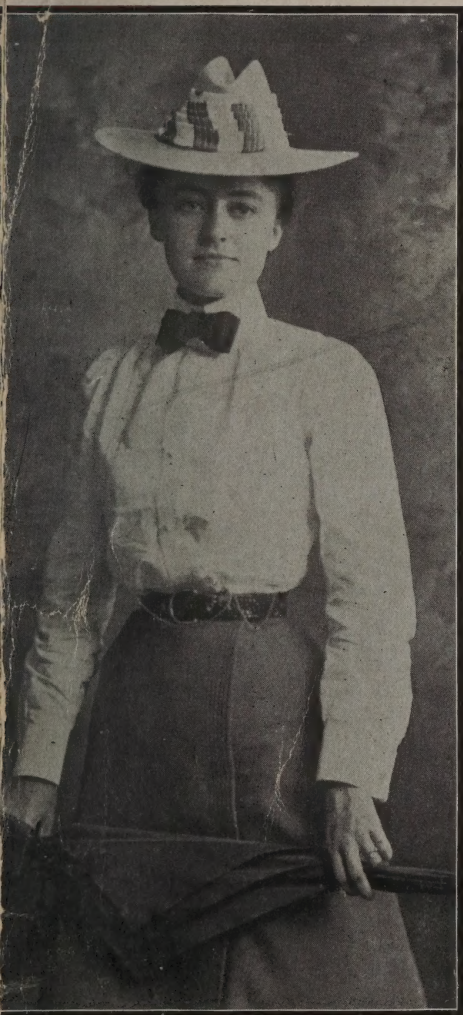


The Homesteader's Daughter



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*A Story
of the Times*

(FOUNDED ON FACT)

BY
JENNES
BRYANSEN

NEW YORK

1900

Sept. 17

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Handwritten text in the middle section, possibly a date or a short paragraph.

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Handwritten text in the lower middle section, possibly a signature or a note.



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"THE LIVES OF THE CHILDREN MUST BE SAVED."

IN EXCHANGE.

MAR 13 1916

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JENNES' BRYANSEN

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NEW YORK

1900

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THE HOMESTEADER'S DAUGHTER.

CHAPTER I.

SAVED FROM A BLIZZARD.

Virginia Grafton awoke one morning a real heroine. Her name had gone with lightning speed into every part of the world where the daily newspaper was read. Already letters and telegrams were on their way to her, conveying congratulations and praise, and some of them tendering more substantial appreciation. Presents of value and elegance, accompanied by the most fervent letters of transmittal, began to pour in upon her before she had half-opened her eyes to the fact that she had done anything to entitle her to more than passing notice. What had she done, anyway, to cause all this interest and laudation?

She and her little school had been enveloped in a blizzard. It was impossible for them to stay longer in the schoolhouse, and it seemed madness to go out into the storm and hope to reach a place of safety. Yet something must be done. No one dared venture to the coal-house for fuel, and the benches had been consumed to keep the children from freezing. Every mouthful of food brought for the noonday meal by pupils and teacher had been eaten. The snow, mixed with sand and particles of burnt stubble, was beating hard against the windows; the howl of the wind was like that of a maddened animal; the day had been turned into night by the thickness of the storm; the house trembled at times as if it would break in pieces; and, as a last warning, a window gave way to the violence of the

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blizzard. This threw the children into a panic, and it was only by the greatest effort of the brave little teacher that they were prevented from rushing out of the house into the teeth of the storm. Something now had to be done quickly. To wait longer for help from the outside would be suicidal. The schoolroom was rapidly filling with snow, and every child would be frozen to death within an hour. If any father or brother had started out in the storm in the hope of rescuing the blizzard-bound school he had been lost. The teacher gave up all hope of succor from this source. The lives of the children must be saved, and the teacher nerved herself to the hazardous undertaking. She had faced the dangers of many a storm on the prairie and she fully realized the awful responsibility she was about to assume. She hurriedly took off her underskirt, and, by a skillful use of her penknife, ripped it into strips. These she tied together and with the line thus made of the strips bound the children securely in a column, with the smallest pupils near the head. She then took her bearings with a small pocket compass, which she had used many times in her life in determining her course on the ocean-like prairie and upon which she placed implicit confidence. With this as her guiding-star, she was ready to go forth into the relentless storm, hoping and praying that she might be able to save the lives of the dear children under her charge.

"Now, my dear children," said she, "you must walk close together; be brave and follow me. I shall lead you by the line I have made of my skirt, and with the help of our Heavenly Father, who has promised help in time of need, we shall endeavor to find safety in the nearest farmhouse. Do not pull back lest you break the line; try and not fall down; but if you do, cry out, so we shall all stop at once till you get up; the larger pupils must not go too fast for the younger ones, and by being steady and strong and patient we may be saved."

The door was thrown open and in the face of the cold, pelting, whirling, merciless storm the courageous teacher led forth her flock of precious souls to battle with the elements and make a struggle for their lives. She had placed her compass in her mitten where she could consult it constantly; and, having taken the bearings of every house in the district tributary to the school, she took the direction indicated by the compass to the nearest place of safety, and pursued this course as the mariner does on the bosom of the broad ocean in darkness and storm. The prairie was slightly undulating, and the snow on the protected sides of the hills was piled in drifts, while in the more exposed places the ground was comparatively bare. The teacher occasionally reminded the children that they were going in the right direction, and that if they would be brave and hold out she believed all would be saved. She would say, "The little compass I have shown you often cannot tell a lie, and it is pointing straight to Mr. Browning's house, where we shall be welcome till the storm is over. We shall soon be there. Be brave, my darlings."

The children believed in their teacher, and so far as they were able, obeyed her every instruction. Now and then, when a strong gust of wind would strike the little line of struggling heroes, one or more of the youngest and weakest would fall, but they were quickly helped to their feet and the column would move on. Thus they battled with the storm, which seemed to be increasing in violence and fury every minute; but the children had faith in their teacher and followed her in trusting determination. With her eye on the compass she led the way, and believed she had passed over most of the distance between the school-house and the Browning home. Suddenly there was a shriek from the rear end of the column and the line jerked back hard enough to break it.

"Stand still," cried the teacher, "let no one move while I find out what the trouble is."

She soon discovered that three of the largest boys had deviated far enough from the direct line of march to fall into a "slough well" which had been left uncovered. Fortunately it was not very deep and she was able to pull the boys out and soon made them fast to the line. As she went forward to the head of the column she cheered each child with some encouraging word. Two little fellows were nearly exhausted; indeed, all were in a condition not to last much longer. The teacher herself was benumbed and almost worn out with the exertion and anxiety she had undergone. Suddenly the column was brought to a halt by one of the smallest children falling completely exhausted. The child was so far gone that it was impossible for the teacher to rally him, and she took him up in her arms and continued the march. With this additional burden upon her it required all of her courage to continue the struggle. She could hardly see the face of her compass. Two other children gave out and lay down to die. She could not carry all three, and two of the oldest pupils gallantly took it upon themselves to bear them in their arms. The condition of things was growing disheartening enough to try the bravest spirit. The teacher braced herself to a last effort. Her sweet voice rose above the hum of the storm as she cheered the children with words full of the courage of her own soul. Her words acted like a stimulant on the children and they nerved themselves anew for the struggle still before them. When it seemed that they must succumb, the head of the column came up suddenly against a fence. The teacher cried out, "Children, we have found a fence and I think we are saved. It must be the fence around Mr. Browning's stable, for he has no other wood fence on his place." The children gave a cry of delight, and all were made stronger except the little ones who were

being carried and seemed unconscious. The column groped its way along the fence, touching it occasionally to know that they had not lost their new-found guide. When they had gone far enough to be on the side where the house was indicated to be by the compass, the teacher lay down on the snow and peered towards what seemed to be the dim outlines of a house. To her inexpressible joy she saw a light, very dim, but unmistakable. Taking up the unconscious child in her arms and rallying the others in the column, she moved in the direction of the beacon-light from the window of a homesteader's abode. A few steps further and the teacher was at the door knocking for admittance, and thanking God that she was there with the thirty-five precious children who had followed her lead with such abiding faith and enduring courage. The door was thrown open and they were admitted to shelter and warmth. Mrs. Browning and her two grown daughters were wild with joy when they saw that the teacher and children were safe in their home. Mrs. Browning's joy was greater because one of her own children was among the saved, yet her heart was full of thankfulness on account of the others. The children were wrapped in warm blankets and given warm coffee to drink, and, as soon as possible, warm food. The unconscious children were stripped and bathed in warm water and thoroughly rubbed until the circulation of the blood was restored. Within a half-hour all had been cared for and were resting comfortably. Mrs. Browning and her daughters had been so engaged with the children that they had not missed Mr. Browning, who had gone out early in the storm for the purpose of bringing the school children to his home. But now having time to look about them and not seeing him, they all asked, fixing their eyes upon Virginia: "Where is papa?"

"We have not seen him," she answered.

"Why!" exclaimed Mrs. Browning, "did he not fetch you from the schoolhouse?"

"No," replied Virginia, "we have not seen him."

"Oh, merciful Father, he must be lost!" exclaimed Mrs. Browning; "he went out into the storm to bring the school here, and you have not seen him!"

The two daughters at once began to cry in the most hysterical manner, declaring that they knew "papa must be lost in the blizzard," and the three began to pray for his deliverance.

Virginia, though in a greatly weakened condition, endeavored to console and reassure them. She said:

"Most certainly Mr. Browning can take care of himself. If I was able to bring the children safely from the schoolhouse here, he would be able to find shelter."

Mrs. Browning and her daughters were so wrought up that they seemed unable to comprehend anything that pointed toward the possible safety of Mr. Browning. The one awful vision seemed to have engulfed them—that he was lost in the blizzard. Finally, however, Virginia succeeded in quieting them, and, feeling the absolute need of rest she drank a cup of coffee and retired to bed.

Toward morning the storm abated somewhat, and about eleven o'clock in the forenoon had gone down sufficiently to allow persons to go out. Mrs. Browning and her daughters, assisted by Virginia, dug their way through the drifts to the stable and shed to discover the fate of the stock. They found the horses lifted nearly to the roof of the stable by the impacted snow, mixed with dirt and sand, and in a most pitiable condition. By great effort they succeeded in digging away enough of the drift to enable the animals to emerge from their prison of snow. It was found that the cow-shed, which was made by running the straw from the thrasher over a framework of poles, was entirely free from drift, and to this the horses were,

after some considerable trouble, transferred. As the women were moving about in the stable, doing what they were able to do to relieve the immediate wants of the stock, one of the daughters stepped on something which gave her such a fright that she screamed and ran toward the door. Her mother and sister followed her, demanding in an excited way the cause of her alarm. The girl was so frightened that she stood speechless. Virginia, discovering that nothing could be obtained from the girl in the way of an explanation, went in search of the cause. She soon found the form of a man, half-buried in the straw, in a semi-unconscious condition, with his hands and face badly frozen. It was so dark in the unlighted stable that she could not discern his features, but she took hold of him and attempted to drag him to the light of the door. Her strength was not equal to the task, however, and she called to the other women to come to her aid. They all cried out:

“It must be papa; oh! papa is dead.”

It took Virginia some time to persuade them that the man was not dead and that he needed assistance to save his life. She finally induced them to come to her aid. As soon as they took hold of the man, however, they screamed and ran away toward the door. In utter despair of getting help from the frightened women, Virginia redoubled her efforts and finally dragged the man to the door, where she discovered that it was not the body of Mr. Browning, but that of Mr. Moore, a ranchman whose place was not far from that of her father. When Mrs. Browning and her daughters saw that it was not Mr. Browning, they became sufficiently composed to take hold of the body and assist Virginia in half carrying, half dragging it toward the house. They had not gone far when several men drove up in a two-horse sled. They had been to the schoolhouse, and finding the back of a book which Virginia had been

thoughtful enough to nail to the blackboard on which she had written, "Started for Mr. Browning's at six o'clock," they immediately drove over to the Browning ranch, arriving there in time to relieve the women of their painful task of carrying Mr. Moore to the house. After this had been accomplished they took Virginia aside and broke to her the sad news that they had the body of Mr. Browning in the sled, which they had found not far from the school-house, partly buried in a snowdrift. They begged her to communicate the dreadful fact to Mrs. Browning and her daughters. They declared they had not the heart to do it.

The brave little teacher shrank from the ordeal, but finally consented to undertake it. Calling Mrs. Browning and her daughters together, she accomplished her task with rare good judgment and great tact, but the effect was, nevertheless, crushing to a degree not easily described in words. In the midst of this scene of sorrow other ranchmen who had been to the schoolhouse came to the Browning home. Among them came the father and mother of Virginia, who, after embracing their only child, and thanking God that she was safe, turned their attention to ameliorating the sorrows of Mrs. Browning and her children. The men and women of the district continued to arrive until every child who had been saved by the intelligent heroism of Virginia had been clasped in the arms of his parents. Their feelings were those of mingled sadness and joy—joy because their own were saved, and sadness because of the sorrow which had come to the Browning home. Probably no such scene was ever witnessed before. The strong, brave men kissed Virginia, wrung her hand, thanked God for such a woman, and hugged the children up to them as if to reassure themselves that they were not mistaken in finding their children alive, and gave expression to their sorrow for poor Mrs. Browning and her children in a manner to leave no doubt of its depth and gen-

uineness. Their joy, however, was greater than their sorrow. They could sympathize truly with Mrs. Browning, but they could not appreciate the great loss that had come to her and the blackness of the cloud of despair which overshadowed her heart and her home.

Other fathers had started out in the storm for the purpose of rescuing the school, but, like Mr. Browning, never reached their destination. Bewildered and overcome by the whirling, blinding, cruel blizzard, they laid themselves down and died. In three cases, brothers, who were stronger than their fathers, attempted to brave the blizzard to save members of their families, and were beaten down by the storm into stupor and death. The entire community was in mourning, and yet rejoicing was in nearly every home in the district because the children had been saved. With one voice the people blessed and praised Virginia.

Virginia's father was among the number who had plunged into the blizzard with the determination of saving, if possible, his daughter and the dear little children under her care. After wandering over the prairie, he stumbled, half dead, against a settler's house, and was taken in and cared for. When the storm had subsided, though in no condition to go out, Mr. Grafton insisted on being taken to the schoolhouse. Here he found the notice on the blackboard and at once started for the Browning ranch. He had not driven far when he met Mrs. Grafton in a sleigh with the hired man. Mrs. Grafton was informed of the notice on the blackboard, and together the party drove to the Brownings', hoping and praying that they might find on arriving their daughter and the children.

Mr. Grafton took Mr. Moore in his sleigh to his ranch, where he could receive better care than at the Brownings'. Mrs. Grafton and Virginia remained to administer to the needs of Mrs. Browning and her sorrowing children. Yet, as soon as she could do so, Virginia went to other homes

in the district upon which the cold hand of death had been laid. In fact, she was ubiquitous. Like an angel spirit she seemed to be everywhere comforting and helping. She had been popular in the district where she had lived all her life, and was esteemed and respected, but now she was the object of the admiration and love of every one, on account of the ideal character brought out by the most trying circumstances. Notwithstanding the praise bestowed upon her, and the universal love manifested toward her on account of her great achievement in saving the school, and her endeavors to soften the sorrows of those who had suffered irreparable losses by reason of the storm, she seemed unconscious that she had done anything outside of the pale of simple duty.

Letters and telegrams began to pour in upon the heroine school teacher, congratulating and praising her without stint. Valuable presents, and sums of money ranging from one to one hundred dollars, were received by her from persons of whom she had never heard, but who had read in the newspapers of her heroic deed. The money amounted in the aggregate to several hundred dollars. At first Virginia was disposed to return the presents and the money, but she was dissuaded from this by those who appreciated more fully than the modest teacher the estimate placed upon her achievement by the country at large. Virginia insisted, nevertheless, upon using the money for relief purposes. At her suggestion a committee was formed with a view to carrying out this idea. Many of the farmers in the community had recently settled upon land and were in the struggle of a beginning. Many of these were ill-prepared for the devastating blizzard which swept over that part of the State. These suffered most, some of them being in dire need of assistance. The money sent to Virginia was used for their relief; and many families were actually saved from prolonged suffering by this timely aid. The

older and better-fixed homesteaders gave freely of grain and provisions to relieve the destitution of their newly-arrived neighbors, and contributions of provisions were received from older communities, but the money turned over by Virginia was a Godsend. No one felt more thankful than she toward those who had, by their generous appreciation of her act, enabled her in this way to meet the wants of suffering humanity.

Among the presents received by Virginia was a beautiful gold watch set in diamonds, and an elegant gold chain. With it came a letter which somewhat annoyed her, and decided her to return at once the valuable gift. The letter was postmarked in a New Jersey city, and read as follows:

“DEAR MISS GRAFTON :—I have read of your heroic act in leading more than thirty school-children through a terrible snow storm—called in your country, a blizzard, I believe—to a place of safety, and I have been so moved by the story that I beg you to accept of the accompanying watch, duly inscribed to you. It is a small token of my appreciation and admiration of the heroic teacher whose name is given as Virginia Grafton. A young woman of such rare qualities of head and heart must become the object of admiration, aye, even more than that, the love of manly and womanly hearts everywhere. Pardon me for saying to you that I am a wealthy young man, fancy-free, and that I have for a long time been on the lookout for just such a young woman as you have proved yourself to be, to whom I might, in a proper way, and at the proper time, pay my attentions with a view of making her my wife. May I have the honor and pleasure of visiting you under these circumstances? I need hardly add that I shall be extremely pleased to place in your hands the highest testimonials of my good character and position in society before I can expect a favorable answer from you. Will you be kind enough to consult with your parents, or such persons as you deem necessary, respecting my wish, and either directly or through them, inform me of your decision, at as early a day as shall be convenient for you?

Believe me, sincerely,

Your ardent admirer,

JOHN HAWLEY VAN KIRK.”

The epistle could hardly have been more manly in letter and spirit. Virginia was bound to admit this, and made up

her mind at once to treat it in the broad and generous spirit which prompted it. She showed it to her father and mother, and asked their advice as to what answer she should make. Both agreed that the letter could have emanated from no other than a gentleman, and hence gave their consent that a courteous and kindly reply should be sent. All things considered, it was also determined that the better thing to do with the watch and chain was to return them, with the explanation that it would be hardly proper to accept a present of such value. This was done. Within a few days another letter from Mr. Van Kirk was received by Virginia, accompanied by a plainer gold watch and chain, with this inscription:

"To Miss Virginia Grafton, the young school teacher who risked her life to save the lives of her school, and by rare judgment and great courage achieved an act which enshrines her name among the most renowned of her sex."

The letter urged acceptance of this simple token of appreciation and admiration, and added that the giver would consider it in no sense extravagance on his part if he should lay at her feet a present worth many times the value of the watch and chain. The letter begged in most respectful and earnest terms that the request of the writer expressed in his first letter—that he be permitted to visit the home of the Graftons—be granted.

With the consent of her parents, Virginia wrote to her generous admirer that the second watch would be accepted in the spirit in which it was offered; that, while she felt he greatly overestimated her act in leading her school through the storm to a place of safety, yet, she truly appreciated his generous praise, and was thankful for all his kindly words and his most generous gift. She also informed him that after fully considering his request, with the approval of her parents she invited him to visit her home. She informed him that he would not find, perhaps,

the luxuries of the East in the houses of homesteaders on the Western prairie, yet she felt certain he would find honest cordiality and genuine hospitality. She added that it might be well in the meantime to satisfy her father as to his character.

Within a fortnight Mr. Grafton received from Mr. Van Kirk a letter thanking him for his decision and that of his family to allow him to visit their home. He enclosed letters from well-known banking firms and large corporations and trust companies endorsing him in the most unreserved terms. No credentials could have been more to the point or more exhaustive. The letters were all attested by record seals so that their genuineness could not be doubted.

Mr. Grafton was well enough pleased with the prospect of a visit from a person enjoying such distinction, yet he had some misgivings as to the possible outcome of it all. It was perfectly clear to him that Mr. Van Kirk had conceived a strange admiration and fondness for his daughter, whom he had never seen, and of whom he actually knew nothing except what he had read in the newspapers, which told the story of her heroism in saving her school from destruction by a blizzard. Mr. Grafton was not unmindful or wanting in appreciation of the greatness of his child's achievement. Indeed, of all others he was most appreciative and proud of his daughter because of her splendid womanhood. In truth, he worshiped her as no other man could. Yet he knew also that she was only a plain, sensible, brave country girl, possessing very vague notions of the kind of society to which the wealthy Van Kirk was accustomed; and he felt that when the young man came to see Virginia he would soon lose his fancy for her; not because she was not good enough for him—oh! no, not that, for she was good enough for any man—but because his notions would unfit him to judge of the real value of such a girl as Virginia. He might be able to judge correctly

of the merits of the ladies of wealth and aristocracy, for he was of that class evidently, but what would he know of the value of such a girl as his daughter? "He wouldn't know," observed Mr. Grafton, "anymore about it than he would know the value of a Western steer on the range." Besides, Mr. Grafton had very decided ideas about plutocracy, aristocracy, and all that, and he had a sneaking notion that Van Kirk belonged to that class, else he would not be endorsed so strongly by presidents of trusts and corporations. He remarked very emphatically to his wife one day, when they were talking about Van Kirk's expected visit, that he could never consent to have his daughter marry a man who belonged to a class that looked down upon the common people with contempt. No; he would never consent to that. He was down on plutocracy because, as he contended, plutocrats are oppressors of the people, and he would never compromise with them to the extent of allowing his daughter to marry into such a set. He recalled the fact that one of the strongest letters of commendation sent by Mr. Van Kirk was written on the letter-head of a trust, and calling the attention of his wife to the matter he said:

"This looks suspicious, wife, and we must go slow in this business. He may be a nice young man, and be sincere in his admiration of Virginia; but if he is in a trust or is backed by a trust, we'll have very little to do with him. Why! what would our Governor, and our great Senator, and all my friends, who are fighting like tigers against the 'tarnal trusts, think and say should they hear that my girl, Virginia, my only child, was receiving the attentions of a plutocrat—one of the very worst, too, living as he does right down in New Jersey, which, as Mr. Bryan says, is a regular hotbed of trusts? This will never do, wife. It would ruin my prospects. I am talked of, you know, for lieutenant-governor on the Pop ticket, and I'd stand no

chance at all if it got out that I was harborin' a plutocrat in my house, and that Virginia was being courted by a pampered son of a trust. I'm sorry now we wrote that letter inviting him to come to see us. But it is done and I suppose we will have to stand by it."

"Yes, my dear," said Mrs. Grafton, "I know what you say is true about plutocrats and trusts, but you know Mr. Van Kirk had not asked to be allowed to court Virginia. He only asked to be permitted to visit us; that is all, my dear."

"Yes," replied Mr. Grafton, "I know that; but you know as well as I do that he is comin' to see Virginia; that's as plain as the crime of '73, as Mr. Bryan says, just as plain as that—and I won't consent to have any goldbug buzzin' around my daughter—not if I can help it."

"You may be too prejudiced, papa, in judging of this man," replied Mrs. Grafton. "He may be, like yourself, on the side of the common people, and down on railroads and corporations and trusts. Maybe he is for the rasho, too, and for referendum, and all them things which that great man, Mr. Bryan, talks so much about."

"What! and he from New Jersey, right up there near Wall Street? You must be crazy, wife; they don't grow 'em up there. They are bloodsuckers, every one of 'em. Bad as the Jersey 'skeeters which suck blood while the plutocrat sucks your hard earnings. You can bet your best cow, wife, that Van Kirk is a soulless plutocrat or else he wouldn't be trainin' with 'em."

"It may be so, my dear," meekly answered Mrs. Grafton, "but it might be well to wait and see before condemning him."

"Of course we'll have to wait. We're in for it; but I'll bet a horse it'll beat me for lieutenant-governor."

CHAPTER II.

RANCHMAN MOORE, WHO WAS FOUND IN THE STABLE, IN
LOVE WITH VIRGINIA.

Mr. Moore, who made a heroic attempt to reach the schoolhouse in the hope of rendering aid to the school—but whose real motive was to help the teacher—and who came near freezing to death in his wanderings on the prairie, was now, thanks to the good nursing he had received at the Grafton home, able to be about. His “face had peeled off” and his ears had resumed their normal size, while his hands were sufficiently recovered to enable him to feed himself. He was still in a badly used up condition, however, notwithstanding his rapid convalescence. He was happy and contented in spite of his physical condition, for the reason that he was under the same roof with Virginia, and was being nursed and cared for partly by her.

Mr. Moore was quite a favorite with Mr. Grafton because of his position in the county as one of the principal ranchers, having eight hundred acres under fence, with substantial buildings, and possessing a large herd of cattle and a band of several hundred horses. In addition to this he had rather coincided with Mr. Grafton in his political views, and had taken quite an interest, in a certain way, in securing his election to the legislature. This was all accentuated by Mr. Moore's having asked of Mr. Grafton the privilege of paying his addresses to Virginia. For some time the latter had coaxed himself to believe that the match was practically settled, although Virginia had said nothing to him to confirm it, nor had she shown any particular interest in her suitor. In fact, she seemed more

interested in books, in the study of plants and flowers, in the science of agriculture, in music, so far as she had opportunity to study it, and, indeed, in going with her father hunting antelope and prairie-chickens, rather than in the young gentlemen of her acquaintance.

It might be truthfully said that Mr. Grafton preferred Mr. Moore as a suitor for his daughter to any other young gentleman who had paid her any attention, not excluding a young State officer whom the Graftons had met during the winter Mr. Grafton had been in the legislature, and who had made several visits to the Grafton ranch. This young man, whom we shall know as Mr. Spellbinder, was one of the strongest and most popular advocates of the political doctrines which were as sacred to Mr. Grafton as the tenets of his religion. He was looked upon as one of the bright, particular stars of the Populist party, and was a personal and loyal friend of Mr. Bryan. Mr. Grafton was very proud of his friendship and highly gratified at the attentions he paid to his daughter. Notwithstanding all this, Mr. Grafton had not overlooked the fact that the young officer was poor, and that he depended on his success in politics for his income. While Mr. Grafton's political philosophy would not allow him to look with any considerable degree of tolerance on wealth and the power of wealth, yet he thought it would be better for Virginia if she could marry a man with an assured income. This Mr. Moore had; and, after thinking the matter all over carefully, Mr. Grafton had arrived at the fixed conclusion that Mr. Moore would make a more desirable husband for his daughter than Mr. Spellbinder. To be sure, he had not been active in politics and did not stand as high in party councils as Mr. Spellbinder; yet he had frequently said enough to indicate that his sympathies were with the party to which Mr. Grafton belonged. At any rate, he had taken enough interest in Mr. Grafton's political aspirations to

vote all the men on his ranch for him for the legislature, and had otherwise taken a practical interest in his political success. In fact, it had been whispered around that Mr. Moore had "put up" some money in different parts of the county where it could be used to the best advantage in securing votes for the Populist ticket. No one saw him personally take any part in the canvass, yet it was quite well understood that he had an agent at work carrying out his plans in the interest of Mr. Grafton. Some of the latter's opponents hinted that the consideration for Mr. Moore's interest in Mr. Grafton was the hand of his daughter. It was more than possible, however, that some one of Mr. Moore's envious rivals for the affections of Miss Grafton had started the story. Let that be as it may, there was something of the mysterious in Mr. Moore's methods as well as in the man himself. More than one had remarked this, and had expressed surprise at the apparent intimacy which had sprung up so suddenly between him and Mr. Grafton. Virginia had said nothing about it, but she had felt this subtle influence of mystery when in the presence of Mr. Moore, and had been repelled by it, despite an effort on her part to like him because of the interest he seemed to take in her father's welfare. She had no fact on which to base this feeling toward him, and she rebelled against it, but to no purpose. Whenever and wherever she met him this feeling would take possession of her and mar the pleasure she would otherwise have taken in his gifted conversation. He was a well-traveled and well-read gentleman, and was most engaging in his manner, much more so than any gentleman she had ever met. But she could not bring herself to be perfectly at ease in his presence. This subtle something that she could not define influenced the sensitive nature of Virginia in such a way as to make her really feel insecure in his company when alone with him. As has been suggested, it was her habit, however,

to demand a reason for all of her actions, and as she had no basic fact to reason from to explain this feeling of repugnance, she was unwilling to admit to herself that he was wholly out of the question with her. She knew how her father felt about it, and she considered it her duty to pay more than passing regard to his wish in the matter. She had always consulted her father and mother in everything involving her welfare, and she had no thought of disregarding their judgment and wish in this, the greatest concern of her life, the selection of a husband. She had not heard her mother express herself respecting Mr. Moore as a prospective son-in-law, although she had heard her speak very highly of him, and had noticed what a genuinely motherly interest she took in him during his convalescence under their roof.

One day Virginia and her mother sat together engaged in sewing, when Mr. Moore entered their presence, holding in his hand an illustrated magazine which he had received in his mail that day. He held the book out to Virginia, and called her attention to the page he had marked. She glanced at the page, and to her surprise saw a good half-tone likeness of herself. She read the article accompanying the illustration, and, as she read, it was noted that her eyes brightened and a deep, rich color came to her cheeks. When she had finished the article she looked up at Mr. Moore and said:

"This is indeed, undeserved praise, and notoriety I hardly relish. I have no doubt of the good intention of the writer, but it seems to me an unwarranted intrusion into one's private life to have a picture of one's self thrust before the public gaze. I can hardly imagine how the writer secured my photograph from which this half-tone was made," and she looked keenly into Mr. Moore's face as if she was waiting for an explanation.

He seemed somewhat confused and appeared to be re-

volving the matter in his mind with a view to an answer. He was for the moment relieved, however, by Mrs. Grafton's asking for the magazine, and as she read the article it was very evident that she was greatly pleased. Her mother's vanity was tickled, and while the story fell short of doing Virginia full credit, yet she felt that it was something out of the ordinary for a country girl to have her picture in a popular magazine. After reading the article, she arose and crossed to where her daughter was sitting, placed her arms about her neck, and kissed her most fervently, saying:

"Daughter, you ought to be proud at being the subject of such a fine notice as that."

"I suspect," said Virginia, "Mr. Moore had something to do with the publication of this article. Am I not correct, Mr. Moore?"

"Well," he replied, "I am almost persuaded to say that I regret I did have something to do with it. I wrote a full account of the storm and the rescue of the children, and the fearful losses sustained by our community to a literary friend who put it in proper form for a magazine article."

"But how did he get my photograph?" asked Virginia.

"I might as well confess, I suppose, Miss Grafton," replied Mr. Moore. "My friend, after reading my letter, wrote me that he would be greatly pleased if I could tell him where he could obtain a photograph of you, and I gave him the name of the artist who made a photograph of you in Lincoln last winter when you were there with your father and mother during the term of the legislature; and I derived my information on that subject from the family album which occupies a place on the table in the front room. I feel that I made a mistake in not asking your consent to do this, and all that seems possible now for me to do to show my regret is to beg your pardon, which I do most sin-

cerely." He said this in a pleading sort of way, and with a real or well-simulated expression of anxiety on his face.

Virginia sat silent for a moment, as if at a loss to know what answer to make. With some animation, however, she replied:

"It was perhaps pardonable in you to furnish in an indirect way the story, but I cannot see my way to any possible excuse for your act in furnishing my photograph for publication without my consent. Nevertheless, we can find no pleasure or profit in pursuing the subject further."

Mr. Moore was disappointed. He had believed that Virginia would be pleased with the article, but in this he was mistaken. He had failed to understand the character of this country school teacher. He had judged her by a standard that fell far below her class, a standard which answers well enough in society generally, but which must not be relied on in measuring women of the delicate sensibilities and modesty and high dignity of Miss Grafton. She could not descend to the level of the society woman who works every scheme to get her picture into the newspapers and magazines, even if money has to be used lavishly to accomplish it.

Mr. Moore, realizing that he had made a mess of it, arose and excused himself and went to his room.

Mrs. Grafton was pained at what had occurred. She realized that Virginia had sent a dart into the vitals of their guest, and she ventured to observe that she did not think Mr. Moore deserved such a severe rebuke.

"My dear mother," cried Virginia, "I feel keenly this humiliation. The very idea of Mr. Moore or anyone else outside of our family, presuming to use my photograph to illustrate a magazine article without our consent! It is simply an unpardonable intrusion into the privacy of one's life."

"But, dearest," said her mother, "you must know that

the whole country is interested in you on account of your heroic conduct in saving your scholars from being frozen to death, and Mr. Moore thought he was actually performing a public service, as well as complimenting you by what he did."

"I rather think my act is greatly overestimated, and, so far as I am concerned, I crave no such compliment," replied the modest but high-spirited girl.

"Well, my dearest, let us drop the subject right where it is. I see you are greatly wrought up on account of it, and what has been done cannot now be undone; so let it go."

"Certainly, mother, it cannot be undone, yet I must insist that I was right in letting Mr. Moore know just how I felt about it."

Mr. Grafton entered the room at this moment and his wife called his attention to the magazine article. When he saw his daughter's picture he gave an exclamation of joyful surprise and kissed it. He was greatly pleased with the notice concerning Virginia, and said it was just splendid. When he learned that Mr. Moore was partly responsible for it, without saying a word to his wife and daughter, he hurried to that gentleman's room, and, in his excitement, entered without knocking.

"Why, Moore," he exclaimed, "this article will be a help to me in my race for lieutenant-gov'ner. Hundreds of honest farmers will vote for me, after reading this article, because I'm the father of such a girl. The article and picture will appear on the 'patent side' of every weekly paper in the State. I tell you, Moore, it's a boomer, and I'm greatly indebted to you for it."

"But," replied Moore, "Virginia doesn't like it a bit; and has just now scored me to the quick for what little I did in connection with the publication."

"You don't mean it," said Mr. Grafton in a changed tone of voice.

"Yes, I do mean it," answered Mr. Moore, "but please don't understand me as finding fault with your lovely and sensitive daughter for anything she has said. I presume I was imprudent and I'm very sorry for it."

"Never mind, Moore, I'll fix that all right with Virginia. She doesn't understand what a boost it will give me throughout the State politically. When she does she will be as tickled as I am over it."

It was quite evident that Mr. Grafton had not learned the real depths of his daughter's nobility of character. He had brought her up; had watched with pride the development of her mind, and had discerned, in a way, the growth of the charms which had begun to distinguish her womanhood, but he had not yet fully comprehended her.

CHAPTER III.

A LETTER FROM MR. SPELLBINDER.

Mr. Grafton had handed a number of letters to his daughter when he came in and had his attention diverted by the magazine article. On returning to the room he found her much interested in one of them which was from Mr. Spellbinder. He wrote that he had just read the magazine article and had enjoyed gazing upon the beautiful half-tone illustration, and that he could not delay writing her a letter of congratulation. He also informed her that he would soon make a visit to the Grafton ranch. After reading the letter she handed it to her father, whose face fairly glowed with animation as he read it.

"That's just what I told Moore," exclaimed Mr. Grafton, "Spellbinder sees it just as I do. That article will make me lieutenant-gov'ner, I'll bet a horse on it."

"What queer twists politicians give to things," observed Virginia.

"You don't call me a politician, do you?" quickly replied her father.

"No, my dear father, not if it's offensive to you; yet, you must admit that you talk politics a good deal, and that you have been holding offices of different kinds ever since the Populists got control of them; and you held several offices before you changed from being a straight Democrat. And really I don't see any harm in being interested in politics, do you?"

"But, I'm no politician, that I'll vow," he answered. "I am a plain farmer, and what part I take in politics is to down the rascally Republicans. and to keep them out of

office. I'll stay in politics, and hold office, if it's necessary, to help the common people defend themselves against the Republican rascals."

"But, surely papa, you don't mean to say that all Republicans are rascals, do you?"

"No, not exactly that," he said, "but every rascal is a Republican." At which he gave a self-satisfied pucker to his lips as if he had said something quite original, and severe on the Republicans.

At this point he took out of his pocket and handed to his daughter a letter from New Jersey, which he seemed to have forgotten in his exhilaration over the magazine article. It was from Mr. Van Kirk, who informed them that he would start for the West within a few days, with the intention of availing himself of the pleasure made possible to him by their invitation for him to visit them.

Mrs. Grafton was a little flurried over the news but said she was glad that he was coming, for she wished to thank him in person for his kindly words of Virginia and the beautiful present he had sent her. Mr. Grafton said nothing, but kept his eyes fixed on the face of his daughter, as if he already suspected that she was indulging a romantic interest for the New Jerseyan.

Virginia gave no sign by word or facial expression that she was glad or otherwise; so her father's penetrating gaze detected nothing in her face indicating that she was specially interested in the announcement. Could he have looked deeper and seen the emotions excited in her heart by the letter, he would probably have been less satisfied with what he saw.

The truth is, her feelings were those of mingled gladness and regret. She was glad he was coming, because they had invited him and it would give them an opportunity to show the consideration due him under the circumstances; and she was regretful because of the uncertainties connecting her

with this young man of wealth and high social position who had been very frank, and—it must be admitted—manly, in his declarations toward her.

At supper the coming of Mr. Van Kirk was referred to, and it was quickly noticed by Virginia that Mr. Moore colored a little, and that he made no reference to the expected event. This was not noticed by either Mr. or Mrs. Grafton, yet somehow or other it made a very deep impression on Virginia's mind. She could not quite explain why it was so, yet there flashed through her mind some remarks Mr. Moore had made at one time respecting the watch and chain Mr. Van Kirk had sent her, and certain little questions he had asked about the giver. The interest he had shown was well guarded, however, and the effect made on the mind of Virginia by what he said was not so much in the words spoken as in the manner of their delivery and the play of certain nerves in his face. This latter was hardly noticeable to the superficial observer, but to the keen and analytical eye of Virginia, this occult play of his countenance was full of significance, which, once rightly interpreted, would always prove disastrous to his attempt at deception. She was thoroughly convinced in her heart that Mr. Moore hated Mr. Van Kirk, and that he abhorred the very thought of that gentleman's coming to the Grafton ranch. This consciousness made Virginia uneasy, and by no means tended to elevate Mr. Moore in her estimation. In fact it really belittled him, and intensified the mystery in which he always appeared to Virginia. There was more than this in her feelings. There came over her a sense of fear that through Mr. Moore's power, in some way, harm would come to her expected visitor. She tried to dismiss this thought from her mind on the ground that it was unreasonable, but she could not rid herself of it.

CHAPTER IV.

A MEETING OF THE POPULIST COUNTY CENTRAL
COMMITTEE.

Mr. Grafton was chairman of the Populist County Central Committee, and had called a meeting of the Committee at the county seat. When he arrived there he was delighted to meet, among other staunch workers in the populist reform movement, Mr. Spellbinder, who was making a tour of the State in the interest of party organization. His special mission on this trip was to arrange for a thorough distribution of a pamphlet printed in German, and made up principally of strong passages from the speech of Hon. Carl Schurz against Imperialism. The plan was to have a copy of this pamphlet put into the hands of every German reader in the State. To accomplish this effectually it was proposed to place enough copies with each county central committee to enable the township committees to put one into the hands of every German secretly. It was confidently believed that if this pamphlet could be thus distributed, the Germans, having so much admiration for and confidence in Mr. Schurz, would quietly make up their minds to follow his advice and vote against the Republicans. The anti-imperialist argument was summed up in the pamphlet in a very direct and simple way by saying that imperialism necessarily meant a large standing army; that a large standing army meant increased taxation—possibly a doubling of the taxes—and, ultimately, the destruction of personal liberty. It was contended that if the Germans could be made to believe this they would slump over to the

side of the Populists and it would carry the State for Bryan, and, possibly, elect a fusion legislature, which would send one Democrat and one Populist to the United States Senate. It was a right clever idea, and it was Mr. Spellbinder's business to meet all of the county committees to effect through them the distribution of this anti-imperialistic literature.

The Committee met and each township was well represented. The interest manifested by the delegates was all that the enthusiastic chairman could have wished. It was soon apparent, however, in the meeting that there was a great diversity of opinion among the committeemen on the plan of campaign to be adopted. They were unanimous about the plan proposed by Mr. Spellbinder and others for the distribution of the Schurz speech to catch the "Dutch vote," as they designated the Germans, but they soon got into quite a spirited wrangle over other questions which were brought to the attention of the Committee by remarks made by Mr. Spellbinder. This gentleman was invited to address the Committee, which he was very glad to do, and in the course of his remarks he said that, there never had been a time when there was greater need of the opponents of the Republican party to stand together; that the battle before them was a harder one than was fought in 1896; that the conditions had changed a great deal since then, especially as regarded the prosperity of the State and of the whole country, and the change was not favorable to the Populist party; that the farmers had good crops and were getting good prices for whatever they had to sell; that every one desiring work could get it at good wages; that mortgages, which were oppressing the farmers in '96, were being paid off by wholesale, and that few new ones were being recorded; that the incentive to want cheap silver dollars was not so prevalent nor so strong as it was four years ago, for the reason that most of the debtors of the country

had become creditors; that the farmers who were anxious to borrow money a few years ago and pay a high rate of interest for it were now actually lending money at the low rate of five and six per cent per annum, and finding little demand for it at that low rate of interest.

“We have got to meet all this, gentlemen,” exclaimed the orator, “and there is one other thing we have got to think about and fix up an argument to meet, and that is the talk that Republicans throw in our teeth about the prophecies made by Mr. Bryan and our speakers in 1896. You all remember what was said by our speakers, who declared emphatically that, if the Republican party was successful in electing its candidate for President, it would increase the purchasing power of the gold dollar, and make the prices on everything the farmers had to sell fall as a stone falls when it is thrown into the air; that the debts of the people would be increased and their power to pay them be lessened; that it would make times harder and harder, would starve everybody except the money-changers and the money-owners, make the rich richer and the poor poorer; that it would increase the number of idle men; that it would decrease the volume of standard money, and encourage the hoarding of money; that it would make it more and more difficult for the farmer to live, make employment less certain, discourage enterprise, and paralyze industry; that it would compel depositors in savings banks to draw their deposits to pay living expenses, and make it impossible to pay off the mortgages, that it would make it necessary to advocate the closing of the public schools; that it would make it more profitable to loan money than to invest it in enterprises or property; that it would make dearer money, cheaper property, harder times, more people out of work, more people destitute, and all that, and we all know that none of these things have come about. In fact, all these prophecies and predictions about the evils that would befall the country if the

gold standard was adopted have entirely failed; and now the Republicans are throwing it up to us and it is about the worst thing we have to meet in this campaign. I thought at the time it was foolish to make them, but Mr. Bryan was the peerless leader, as he is to-day, and he sets the pace for us all; but we all know now that it was short-sighted for us to put our fingers in the trap by going into the prophesying business. We told the farmers that if silver was voted down the price of wheat would go down—that wheat and silver went up and down together; but, nothing of the kind has happened, and a good many farmers say: ‘You fooled us in 1896 and we have’nt got much confidence in what you say now about the terrible calamities that will come on the country on account of trusts and imperialism.’ But we have got to keep up this cry against trusts for that is about the only thing that we have got to talk about in this campaign. We used to make a better showing when we talked about the tariff, and the ‘robber barons,’ but that issue is dead now, and so is the silver question, and whenever we drag these corpses out before the people they turn up their noses as if they smelled something bad—”

Here the orator from Lincoln was interrupted by the chairman of the committee, who remarked with some animation that “It wouldn’t do to talk that way and let it get to the ears of the Republicans or they would make it lively for us around here. Besides I don’t agree altogether with the gentleman. For my part I think that we’d better talk free silver just as we did four years ago; and I think we ought to give it to them hot on trusts.”

“Well,” resumed the interrupted speaker, “it won’t do for us to get into an argument among ourselves over these questions; for, what we want, and what we must have to win this year, is harmony. But we should understand that while Mr. Bryan still holds for free silver at 16 to 1, the

committee on resolutions of the Kansas City Convention, which nominated him, came within one vote of turning it down and leaving it out of the platform. I think now it ought not to be forced to the front. The farmers of the West have'nt any silver mines or any bullion, and what interest have they got in free silver? Why! even the people of Colorado, where silver mines are supposed to be the best, have nearly lost their interest in the free silver question, for they say that they are making more money out of mining gold, and times are better there now than they ever were before, notwithstanding that Senator Teller said the gold standard ruined his State. It seems to have had just the opposite effect. I mention these things simply to call your attention to the fact that we have got a mighty hard row to hoe this year, and that we have got to stand together and whoop it up on trusts, imperialism and militarism. This is the red hot stuff for this campaign. We have got to tell the people that the silver question will keep until we have saved the country by settling the question of imperialism and killing off the trusts, and then we'll take up the silver question and settle that."

"Yes, that's all very good," said one of the committeemen; "but just now you were blaming Mr. Bryan for prophesying about silver and wheat going up and down together, and so on, and that none of these prophecies have come true—now you propose to have us prophesy that the country will go to the devil if the Republicans win, because they are in favor of expansion and militarism. Now, suppose none of our predictions about these things come true, what kind of a hole will we be in four years from now when we come before the people again? I think we had better keep out of the prophesying business altogether."

Several of the committeemen spoke up at once, and said that they thought this was about right, and that they had

better pitch into the trusts tooth and nail, and "lay low" on the other things.

One committeeman thought that it would be the best thing not to say much about anything except imperialism, which would scare the Germans into voting against the Republicans. He said, "We can make 'em believe that the Republicans are going to increase the army and make it so big that it will double their taxes, and in time crush them down and make them as bad off as they were in Germany before they came to America. If we can do this we can carry several of the States in the West where the Germans are pretty thick."

"But, then," said another, "the army is as big now as it will be, unless we raise more troops to help punish 'the heathen Chinee' for murdering our people; and I'll be blamed if my taxes have been increased very much so far, and I don't believe anybody else's have. How are you going to make anybody believe—even a stupid Dutchman—that his taxes will be doubled, when the army has already been increased nearly three times its size without increasing anybody's taxes perceptibly? I don't think we will be able to fool very many of the Dutch with that kind of an argument. My idea is we've got to stir up the people on the subject of trusts."

"But," said another, "what are you going to say about trusts that will take hold of the voters?"

"Why," interposed Mr. Spellbinder, "tell the people that the trusts will eat the very life out of the nation if they are not put down."

"I don't see much in this anti-trust argument, so far as the farmers are concerned," said another. "I don't see that any trust has ever hurt me. I buy agricultural implements and everything I use on my ranch cheaper than I ever did before. There is a good deal of talk against the Standard Oil Company, but I recollect when I used to pay thirty-five

cents a gallon for poor coal oil before this Standard Oil Company got hold of all the oil wells, and now I get good oil for eight cents a gallon. When it comes right down to the point it seems to me that the trusts have made things cheaper, than any other way."

Chairman Grafton had become quite uneasy on account of the way the talk had drifted, and he suggested that, while it was well enough for them to give expression to their ideas about things, yet he didn't think that it was quite the thing to take up all the time of the meeting in that way. He thought they had better get down to business.

After some talk about organization, and the best way to put Mr. Schurz's speech into the hands of the Germans, the committee adjourned.

CHAPTER V.

MR. SPELLBINDER VISITS THE GRAFTONS.

Mr. Spellbinder informed Mr. Grafton that he had arranged his itinerary so as to go out to the latter's ranch to visit for a day. Mr. Grafton expressed unfeigned pleasure at this, and as soon as he had made a few purchases and attended to a little business they started for the ranch. On their way out they talked a good deal about the prospects of the Fusion party in the coming national election, but neither seemed to be particularly enthusiastic over the situation.

When they arrived at the ranch Mr. Spellbinder was received with marked consideration and cordiality by Mrs. Grafton and her daughter. He was regarded by them as a very distinguished guest, probably the most distinguished of any who had ever been entertained at the Grafton home. He met them with unusual warmth, as if he felt that they must be highly gratified at having a State officer for their guest; in fact, Virginia thought he was a trifle patronizing, which she did not like but did not allow it to influence her in her manner toward him.

Mr. Grafton called Mr. Moore into the room where Mr. Spellbinder was airing his eloquence to the ladies, and declared that he was anxious to have the two gentlemen meet. He introduced them, remarking to Mr. Spellbinder that Mr. Moore was his neighbor and a stanch friend; that he had rendered him very valuable service when he ran for the legislature, and that he hoped to see Mr. Moore take a high place in the councils of the Fusion party at an early day. To indicate to Mr. Moore the importance of Mr.

Spellbinder, he remarked to the former that the latter was one of the most eloquent speakers in the Populist party and a personal friend of Mr. Bryan.

The two gentlemen expressed mutual satisfaction at the meeting; but it was noticed by the keen eyes of Virginia that Mr. Spellbinder availed himself of the opportunity to scrutinize the face of Mr. Moore every time the latter's attention was attracted away from him. She observed this particularly at supper, at which the two gentlemen sat opposite each other with Virginia occupying a position from which she could observe the faces of those gentlemen without appearing too much interested. She came to the conclusion that Mr. Spellbinder fancied he had met Mr. Moore somewhere before and was trying to recall the time and place.

Supper was one of Mrs. Grafton's best meals; and this fact, together with the appetite of Mr. Spellbinder, which had been whetted to a keen edge by the ride over the prairie, made that gentleman relish the meal to an unusual degree. He remarked that, if her supper was a sample of the living enjoyed by the homesteaders, they were certainly to be envied, especially by bachelors who were compelled to put up with the average boarding-house fare. Mrs. Grafton acknowledged the compliment; and her husband, who was proud of the success of his efforts to make a comfortable home on the western prairie, remarked:

"We are thankful to have plenty to eat and wear, but I'll tell you we've had to work for it—Mrs. Grafton and I, and I must not leave out Virginia, for she, too, has helped to work out our success."

"Please do not give me any credit, father, for surely I have done little or nothing towards your success," interposed Virginia.

"Yes, you have, my daughter, yes, you have," answered Mr. Grafton. "I am not ashamed to tell what you have

done. I don't know what I would have done during the long drought, without any cash to pay taxes and interest with, if it hadn't been for the money you earned teaching school and generously turned over to me."

"Oh, please say nothing about that, papa," said Virginia, the color in her face heightening somewhat, "I simply performed a very pleasant duty."

"Yes, but it isn't every daughter who thinks that way," replied Mr. Grafton.

Mr. Spellbinder and Mr. Moore had both turned their eyes upon the young lady in evident admiration, which had the effect of increasing her embarrassment. Mr. Spellbinder noticed this and sought to turn the subject of the conversation by referring to the recent blizzard in which Virginia had so distinguished herself; but Mr. Grafton had his piece to speak and was not to be diverted from his program. He was very proud of his success as a farmer, and it was one of his weaknesses to tell the story of how he had begun with nothing and worked out a reasonable success in life on the border. Without encouraging further reference to his daughter's heroic achievement, he said:

"You don't know what we homesteaders had to overcome in opening up this prairie country. You are newcomers here—kind of 'tenderfeet,' as it were—and don't realize fully the hardships which every old settler in these parts has endured. I took up this homestead twenty-eight years ago, and when I located here and built a sod house there wasn't a human habitation that could be seen with the naked eye. We came here in a 'prairie schooner'—a big covered wagon, in other words—hauled by a pair of mares, and all I had in the world was my brave wife to encourage me; and between us we had some furniture, a cook stove, a few groceries, a box of side-meat, five sacks of flour, some shelled corn, potatoes and beans, a lot of garden-seed, a breaking and stirring plow, and a corn-plow,

some nails, two window-sash, glazed, some boards, a coop of hens and a rooster, a boar and a sow, a cow and a heifer, and about fifty dollars in money. I took up a homestead of a hundred and sixty acres of good land, and afterward a timber claim, which made three hundred and twenty acres in the farm. The first year I built a house of sod, of two rooms, a stable for the horses, a cow stable, a pig and hen-house, all of sod, and broke up twenty acres of land. I subsoiled five acres and planted it with potatoes, beans, cabbages, peas, and garden truck. I planted the remaining fifteen acres to sod-corn, buckwheat and turnips. The first year's crops were all I could have desired and a great deal more than I expected. I assure you I was as happy a man as anybody ever saw or heard of when fall came and I had plenty for myself and wife to live on and to subsist the stock for another year; but I worked day and night to do it, that is, my wife and I did."

"How did you build the houses with sod, Mr. Grafton?" asked Mr. Spellbinder.

"Well, I plowed up a half acre of sod of uniform thickness, and cut it into even lengths of about fourteen inches. I laid out the house by smoothing away and leveling the surface of the ground. I then laid the sods carefully the same as if they had been bricks of like size, only no mortar was used. I left window and door openings and placed in them rude frames made of the lumber I brought with me. When the walls were high enough to receive the roof, I made rafters of poles which I had cut and hauled from the Loup River six miles away. On these rafters I laid two thicknesses of tough sod, overlapping each other, so as to shed water. I took the clay which I had thrown up when I dug a well and made mortar out of it. With this I plastered the rooms and made the walls hard and smooth. I also used clay in making a floor to the dwelling, which I

was able to make very solid by tamping. I made a chimney of sod and clay, and the job was done. Mrs. Grafton used a sheet for a ceiling over the bed and the table which I had made of boards. She made the house bright and cozy with a new rag carpet which she had woven with her own hands and brought from our old home in Missouri. The outbuildings were made in the same way, only they were not plastered. These houses were warm in winter and cool in summer; and we came to be so strongly attached to this our first home after we were married, that it was with considerable regret we gave it up to occupy the frame house we afterwards built, and which is a part of the house in which you are now sitting at table. The first year I cut large quantities of prairie grass for hay, in fact, put up enough hay that fall to last me nearly three years. That first year was a very happy one for Mrs. Grafton and me. We were as contented and happy a pair as ever spent a honeymoon."

"How interesting!" exclaimed Mr. Spellbinder.

"But the next year," continued Mr. Grafton, "was a very different one—it was by no means a continuation of the dream. The second year I plowed up the breaking and harrowed the ground as fine and as smooth as any garden, and got my seeds all planted in good time. The seeds came up and the prospects were as bright and as cheering as any farmer ever had. One beautiful day as I was going out to turn over some more sod for the next year's crop, I noticed that the sun was suddenly darkened as if by a cloud. This darkness continued so long that I looked up toward the sun to see the cause of it, when, to my amazement, I discovered that it was obscured by millions of some kind of insect flying not more than two hundred feet above the ground. It was one black mass of fluttering insect life, so long and wide that the eye

could not see the limits of it. Within a short time the insects began to fall to the ground like raindrops which precede a downpour. These were only forerunners—prospectors, as it were—for within a half-hour enough of the insects had alighted to cover the ground literally, and in some places they were crawling over each other an inch thick. They proved to be the Rocky Mountain grasshopper or locust. When the sun rose the next morning not a grasshopper was to be seen; and the field, green with vegetation the day before, was as barren as it was when I got through harrowing it.”

“That was discouraging enough,” observed Mr. Spellbinder.

“Yes, that was bad enough, but it was not as bad as what followed,” replied Mr. Grafton. “We had enough of some things grown the previous year to run us through the winter by exercising rigid economy. In addition to this I raised some sod-corn and some turnips, planted after the grasshoppers had gone. The wild grass crop was good, for the grasshoppers did not disturb that, so we had abundance of hay for the stock. The next year the hoppers came again and staid all summer, and laid their eggs. They kept the fields bare all the season, and were so thick everywhere that one could not step without crushing a number of them. The next year, when the eggs had hatched, the little hoppers proved more destructive to the crops than had the old ones which fell from the clouds. By the time they were large enough to fly they had eaten everything they could eat, and when they left us it was too late to plant any kind of seed with any prospect of a crop. So we were left in a very destitute condition. We had nothing to feed our hogs, and the horses and cattle were compelled to subsist upon hay. A great many of the settlers left the country, declaring that they would never come

back, and that anybody who wanted their improvements could have them. We stuck it out by the help of contributions received from friends in Missouri, and from relief committees who solicited and forwarded food and clothing to the grasshopper-stricken portion of the State. The railroads hauled these things gratis, and also brought coal in from their own mines in Wyoming, which they distributed free to the impoverished settlers who had the courage to stay on their claims."

"That was a very trying experience, I must say," observed Mr. Spellbinder, "and forms a very interesting chapter in the State's history."

"Yes," said Mr. Moore, "I think as much myself, but I am glad the State got through the grasshopper experience before I made my advent."

"There is one thing in your story, Mr. Grafton, that rather astonishes me," said Mr. Spellbinder. "I was hardly prepared to hear you say that the railroads hauled anything for nothing or made any contributions for the relief of the settlers."

"It is a little surprising after all you have heard against the railroads, but they did even more than that: they made a contribution of money to help the destitute settlers."

"That was certainly generous, wasn't it?" remarked Mr. Moore.

"I don't know about that," replied Mr. Grafton, "they did it out of selfish motives, for if the settlers had all left the State it would have been a terrible backset to the railroad companies. They had millions of acres of land which had been given them as a subsidy by the Government, and these would have become valueless, at least for a great many years, if the country had been entirely abandoned. As it was, the country was set back at least ten years. For one I always felt grateful to the railroads, but never allowed

them to put a brass collar with their brand on it around my neck in politics. Most of us old settlers have been against the railroads in the State politics. We joined the anti-monopoly party when it started, and then went into the Alliance, and from that into the Populist party. A good many of us had always been Democrats, and it was easier for us to work with these parties than with the rascally Republicans. The Populist party was developed in this way:—The old greenbackers and men who hadn't been well treated in the old parties, and the temperance agitators and the fellows who had proved up on their homesteads and mortgaged them and were hanging on by the skin of their teeth, and the anti-Union Pacific fellows, were kind-of brought together by the grasshoppers and the drought, and we now have a pretty strong party."

At this last remark all laughed heartily. Mr. Spellbinder observed that it had never occurred to him that the fusion in the State included grasshoppers and drought; but it seemed quite plain to him now, after what Mr. Grafton had told them, that Providence really had something to do with the organization of the fusion movement.

Mr. Moore, who had been a quiet listener up to this point, or nearly so, spoke up with sudden animation, probably encouraged to do so by the apparent disapproval of Virginia of the remark of Mr. Spellbinder in connecting Providence with politics—a conclusion he reached, not from anything she had said, but from an involuntary shake of her head and the expression of her countenance, which, with her, sometimes meant a great deal more than words—and said:

"I doubt very much the correctness of the suggestion that Providence takes any part in political strife. I can hardly bring myself to the conclusion that Providence would send scourges upon women and children in order to

promote the ends of any political party. I have always been a Democrat, and I am in favor of downing the Republican party, but I fail to see the necessity of dragging Providence into the cesspool of politics in order to accomplish that end."

This rather pleased Virginia, who said:

"I agree with Mr. Moore entirely; besides, I do not believe with papa that everything advocated by the Republican party is bad. All the good is not in any one party, nor is all the bad in any one party. It seems to me the Republican party should be given credit for a good many things it has done in the interest of the poor man, or the plain people, as the politicians say."

"I would like to know one good thing the Republican party has ever done for the common people," replied Mr. Grafton.

"I am no politician," replied Virginia, "nor do I take any special interest in the conflict of parties, but it seems to me from what history I have read that when the Republican party enacted the homestead law, and the timber-claim law, making it possible for the poor man, and woman too, for that matter, to acquire good lands to make a home on, it was a good thing for the common people. The Democratic party, dominated by the slave-drivers of the South, had always refused to pass such laws; but as soon as the Republican party came into power, about the first thing it did was to pass these laws. Besides that, the Republican party was in favor of saving the Union, and having but one flag for the entire country, and really stood back of Lincoln, as against the Democratic party, in all of the war measures which resulted in saving the Union and preserving the one flag, handed down by the fathers who founded the Union. This was certainly in the interest of the common people; and it seems to me that when the Republican party struck

the shackles off of four millions of poor black people, and put it in the Constitution that every man, black and white and red should have equal rights, it was doing something for the common people. And I don't think the Democratic party, at least the bulk of it, which has put in the constitutions of ten Southern States, and on the statute-books of those States, provisions that disfranchise more than half of the voters in some of those States because they are poor and ignorant and comparatively helpless, can claim to be a party devoted to the common people. It seems to me also that the Republican party did something for the common people when it took such high ground in favor of giving liberal pensions to the soldiers and sailors who fought for the Union and were wounded or lost their health by exposure in the line of duty, and in taking care of their widows and orphans. I have always thought that the Republican party was in favor of doing a great deal for the laboring people by favoring laws that kept out of the country goods that were made by cheap or pauper labor in foreign countries, and thus reserving the manufacture of them for our own people; and I am not so sure but that the Republican party has done a good thing for the common people by preventing the coinage of fifty-cent dollars, and instead giving the country gold and paper and silver dollars all of equal value. As a matter of fact, I could think of a good many other things that the Republican party has done for the common people if I would take the time. If papa will excuse me for appearing to be personal I will say that this splendid ranch that we live on was given to him by the operation of a Republican law, and it seems to me he ought not to be so bitter toward that party. But then I am only a woman and I am not supposed to know very much about politics, although I read political history just the same as I do any other history."

Mr. Grafton had listened to his daughter's remarks with a good deal of interest, and while he certainly did not agree with her, he yet manifested in his countenance paternal pride on account of the fact that his daughter could speak so well on current political topics. He could not pass over what she said in silence, and he replied:

"There, you see, gentlemen, I have a rebel in my own camp. It looks very much as if my daughter had not benefited from her home training, and I think that she has been devoting too much time to 'ancient history.' What do we care now what the Republican party may have done years ago? It is what that party is doing now that we are interested in. It is the party of expansion and imperialism and favors protection which fosters trusts, and is opposed to the free coinage of silver. These are the burning issues of the present time, and I commend them to my daughter for her careful consideration."

"I don't pretend to know a great deal about such things," responded Virginia, "but it seems to me that if there had ever been any good reason for the agitation over the free coinage of silver, that reason no longer exists, and therefore the question is dead. As I understand it, the two principal reasons for the agitation are that we didn't have money enough in circulation, and that the gold standard made money dearer. These two reasons for free coinage of silver no longer exist because we have more money now per capita than we ever had, and gold and silver and paper money can be borrowed at a lower rate of interest than ever was known before in this or any other country. The business of the country is good; everything that a farmer or manufacturer has to sell brings a good price and is paid for in money that is worth one hundred cents on the dollar; everybody is paying off his debts, and very few people are going into debt; and, so far as imperialism is concerned,

nobody—Republican or anybody else—is in favor of it, and all the parties are in favor of regulating trusts. There is one thing I like about the Republican party, and that is that they will not allow the flag of the country to be fired on without firing back; and when people fire on it and keep firing on it the Republican party will neither haul the flag down nor run away with it to get it out of the way of the enemy's guns. I don't think any patriot ought to vote against the party on this account. The truth is I would vote against any party that is not in favor of upholding the sovereignty of the United States."

Mr. Spellbinder and Mr. Moore both made no effort to conceal their admiration for Virginia on account of her clear and bold utterances, notwithstanding the fact that she was rapping them hard over the knuckles, figuratively speaking. The truth was that Moore, who was not a politician, was tickled away down in his boots at the way Virginia ripped Mr. Spellbinder up his political back. Moore had never taken any interest in politics of any kind until he had become acquainted with Virginia, and found that in order to make any headway in paying court to her it was necessary for him to appear to take an interest in and to agree with her father. He was a close-mouthed man, and very few persons learned from him anything respecting his business affairs or his political views. Mr. Grafton had told around that Moore was all right politically, and on this account he had been classed with the Populists.

After supper the gentlemen adjourned to Mr. Moore's room, where they indulged in smoking some of his imported cigars. Mr. Spellbinder referred to the lingering effects of Mr. Moore's bitter experience in the blizzard and said:

"You must have had a pretty severe experience in your battle with the blizzard the night you made the attempt to assist Miss Grafton in rescuing her school."

"Yes," replied Mr. Moore, "I did have a pretty severe tussle with the storm. I was lucky though in stumbling up against the cow-shed on the Browning ranch. Just how I got into the stable and what happened after I got in, I don't recollect. A part of the experience is very blank to me, but I was fortunate in falling into the hands of the Graftons after I was found. No one was ever nursed more carefully and kindly than I have been by them, and I owe a debt of gratitude to them that I shall never be able to pay.

"It was a close call," said Mr. Spellbinder.

"Yes," replied Mr. Moore, "as close as I ever had, and I have had some pretty narrow escapes with my life. I owe my life in this case to Miss Virginia."

"You owe your life to Miss Grafton?" exclaimed Mr. Spellbinder. "She must have been an all-round heroine in that storm. The papers were full of her heroism in saving the school, but I did not read anything of her services to you."

Mr. Moore briefly told how she had bravely rallied to his relief when he was found nearly dead in the stable, and was very eloquent in his praise of her.

Mr. Spellbinder joined him in his estimate of Virginia, but a careful scrutiny of his face would have disclosed the fact that he was not particularly well pleased with the thought that the blizzard had brought Moore and Miss Grafton into such friendly relations with each other. He had made up his mind to become an avowed suitor for the hand of Virginia, and this new difficulty in his way aroused in him a feeling of resentment, especially since it had become apparent that Mr. Moore was really in love with Virginia. Just how far he had gone in his love-making was a question in the mind of Spellbinder which he would have given anything in his power to have answered. He made a mental resolve then and there that he would lose no

time in pressing his suit upon Virginia. He was ready to hate any man who dared to place himself in a position to be suspected even of loving Virginia. The truth was that the two men looked upon each other as rivals, and hated each other accordingly.

The conversation between Mr. Spellbinder and Mr. Moore turned on the business outlook of the country in which the latter took a keen interest. Mr. Spellbinder said:

"You have quite a large ranch, I understand, and a good deal of stock."

"Yes, I have a pretty good-sized ranch," answered Mr. Moore, "fairly well stocked for this part of the country, but of course it would be considered a small affair in Texas where ranches are several hundred times larger than mine."

"Stock-raising pays pretty well, doesn't it?" asked Mr. Spellbinder.

"It doesn't always pay," replied Moore, "but during the last three years, or perhaps since the boom set in in 1897, stock-raising has been profitable. Since that time stockmen have received the biggest prices ever known since the Civil War for whatever they had to sell. The worst feature of the times has been that we could not get hands to run the ranches without paying them big salaries, and even at the wages paid it is hard to get good men to do the work. The years referred to have been all that stockmen could wish."

"You really think, then, that the last three years have been prosperous years?" asked Mr. Spellbinder.

"Most certainly I do," replied Mr. Moore. "The figures show that. Stockmen, farmers, laborers, manufacturers and everybody will attest to the truthfulness of the figures which show that for the last three years, from '97 to 1900, the country has had such prosperity as never before. Our

imports have been the largest and our exports have been the largest ever known, and the balance of trade in our favor has been so large that the United States has become the creditor nation of the world. Instead of borrowing money as a nation from foreign nations we are now lending money to them. While we are making internal improvements that astonish the world, and are enlarging our Navy so as to make it the equal of that of any nation, we are about to expend millions of dollars upon an inter-oceanic canal and are carrying on a war at the same time. To me it is perfectly amazing, viewed from a business standpoint, what prosperity the entire country is enjoying, and when you think of it in connection with the fact that only six years ago the Government was borrowing money at a big rate of interest to meet current expenses, and Coxey armies were tramping from one end of the country to the other begging for work and bread, and business failures were more numerous than they had ever been before, and everybody who had money was disposed to hide it away, the present prosperous condition becomes more and more incomprehensible.

"You take a very cheerful, and, it seems to me, exaggerated view of the situation," said Mr. Spellbinder.

"It is not a view nor a theory with me, Mr. Spellbinder," replied Mr. Moore. "When the times are such as to increase my income two or three hundred per cent I ought to be pretty well satisfied with them. It is dollars and cents with me. As long as I get good prices for my cattle and horses it is not much consequence to me what the politicians are saying and doing."

"There is something more than business to be looked at," Mr. Spellbinder replied. "The Bryan platform is in favor of the Declaration of Independence and is against imperialism, militarism and trusts. To be sure it also de-

clares for the free coinage of silver, but the main issue is imperialism. We are against imperialism."

"So am I, and so is everybody," answered Mr. Moore. "This imperialism talk is all rot. There isn't a man in the United States in favor of it; and if he was, everybody would consider him a crank, without regard to party. And so far as trusts are concerned, everybody is in favor of regulating them—Republicans, Democrats and Populists alike. They have all so declared in their platforms, as I understand it. As to militarism, every patriot will be in favor of having an army large enough to protect our interests at home and abroad, and to defend the flag of the country against attacks of an enemy, no matter where he may be. Expansion is a good thing if it makes our country larger and stronger, and puts us in a position to make ourselves felt as a world power. Certainly no one can deny that we are better off because we own Hawaii, Porto Rico and Alaska, any more than one can deny that the United States is better off for having expanded so as to take in the Louisiana Purchase. We have grown to be a great and rich nation and can no longer live and prosper within the narrow limitations which served the United States well enough fifty years ago. There was a time when a twenty-five-acre farm was considered too large for one man to manage, but under present conditions you will find farms in this broad western country covering thousands of acres being successfully managed by one man. The great trouble with the anti-expansionists is that they don't realize that we are a nation of nearly eighty millions of people and are manufacturing more goods and producing more wheat and corn and raising more horses and cattle than any other nation on earth. If we want to keep up prices and be prosperous as a nation we have got to expand, and open doors everywhere for the outlet of what we produce. I

wasn't particularly proud of the Democratic Convention at Kansas City; for, in looking it over, I couldn't find a single man in it that was at the head of or connected with any great business enterprise. While it was a representative convention in the sense that it represented agitators of all kinds and ward politicians, it seemed to me that it fell very much below the Democratic Conventions of twenty-five and fifty years ago."

Mr. Spellbinder was conscious of being up against a business man, and not the kind of a man his fluency of speech would have much effect upon, and he very gracefully ended the conversation by saying he was sleepy and thought he would better retire to his bed; so bidding Mr. Moore good-night, he withdrew.

CHAPTER VI.

MR. SPELLBINDER MAKES LOVE AND SPRINGS A MYSTERY.

The next morning, after breakfast, Mr. Spellbinder and Mr. Grafton were alone together, looking at some Poll-Angus cattle in which the latter took considerable pride and which the former didn't know from the old-fashioned "muley," although he agreed with Mr. Grafton fully on every fine point described by him, and even went so far as to take chances on exposing his ignorance by trying to enlarge upon Mr. Grafton's descriptions. At an opportune time Mr. Spellbinder shifted the subject from Angus cattle, Percheron horses and Berkshire hogs to a subject much nearer his heart, namely, his love for Virginia.

"I want to have a few words with you, Mr. Grafton, about your daughter, if it is agreeable to you," said Mr. Spellbinder.

"Certainly, Mr. Spellbinder, it will be agreeable to me," replied Mr. Grafton.

"The subject is a trifle embarrassing to me," said Mr. Spellbinder, "but I feel it my duty to tell you that I am deeply in love with your daughter, and with your permission I shall endeavor to win her consent to be my wife. I have loved her ever since you were in Lincoln attending the legislature; and while I have not made bold to declare my love to her, yet I have at different times endeavored to impress her with the idea that I was deeply interested in her. Since coming here last evening I have realized more and more how deeply my love for her has taken root, and

I have determined to ask her for her hand before I take my departure, unless you forbid it."

"I feel highly honored, Mr. Spellbinder, by your frank statement, and I do not care to put anything in the way of your wish toward my daughter; but I'll be equally frank with you by saying that I fear that you are a little too late";—and his eye falling upon a fine steer, Mr. Grafton immediately changed the subject back to hoofs and horns by saying to Mr. Spellbinder that that steer would weigh more than three thousand pounds!

Paying no attention to his sudden descent from the sublime to the ridiculous by Mr. Grafton, Mr. Spellbinder called him back to the subject in which he was interested by asking:

"What am I to understand, Mr. Grafton, from what you say about my being too late? Is your daughter engaged to that man Moore?"

He asked this question in a voice that indicated a good deal of feeling, and the look he gave the Angus steer which Mr. Grafton was looking at so intently showed plainly enough that he didn't care a nickel whether the steer weighed one pound or three thousand pounds.

Mr. Grafton turned half around and looked Mr. Spellbinder full in the face and answered:

"I don't know whether she is engaged to him or not, but I am of the opinion that they understand each other pretty well; and from the way the talk drifted at the table last night I guess he has a sixteen to one cinch on her. Maybe I'm wrong, though. She hasn't said as much to me, and she always lets her mother and me know her plans. Moore is a pretty good man, so far as I know, and he has a big ranch and heaps of stock, you know."

Mr. Spellbinder leaned against the corral fence, looking abstractedly at the steers for some time, when he said:

"I guess you don't know this man Moore or you wouldn't have him lying around your house taking advantage of every opportunity to press his suit upon your lovely daughter, who is worthy of a better man than I know Moore to be."

"What do you know about Moore, that we don't?" asked Mr. Grafton in an excited way.

"Well, one thing I know that you don't seem to know, judging from what I have heard you say about him, and that is that he isn't with us politically. You seem to think he is all right in this respect, but I happen to know enough of him to assert that if he isn't a spy in the camp he is trying to fool you for some sinister purpose."

"What is this you are telling me about Mr. Moore? Mr. Spellbinder; let's have all you know," said Mr. Grafton earnestly.

"Last night after you left us in Mr. Moore's room, our conversation turned on the business of the country, and Moore, under the guise of business, pounded the supporters of Bryan into the earth. He said the fusion movement under Bryan was against business prosperity, and that all business men and farmers and laborers ought to let well enough alone; that prosperity was to be seen everywhere, and that the agitation of the silver question, and all this talk about expansion and imperialism and trusts, was calculated to bring on another panic like that we had between '93 and '96. He gave it to us Populists hard, I tell you. He said he wasn't a politician but looked at things from the standpoint of a business man. He gave me the hardest knocks I have had from anybody this year. Do you think that is the kind of man you want for a son-in-law?"

"He never talked like that to me," said Mr. Grafton. "Come to think about it, though, he never talked much about politics to me. But I'll tell you confidentially what

he did do. When I was trying for Congress he let me have three thousand dollars to help me out in paying the expenses of my canvass. I gave him my note secured by a mortgage on all my personal property. He agreed not to place the mortgage on record and to give me all the time I might need to pay off the note. He voted every man on his ranch for me when I ran for the legislature and seemed to take a real interest in my success. It seems to me that he wouldn't have done all that if he hadn't been with us on the main issues."

"So, you owe him three thousand dollars, do you? He lent it to you to run your campaign on; and he holds your note and an unrecorded mortgage on all your personal property, does he?" Mr. Spellbinder said this in an abstracted sort of way, partly to Mr. Grafton and partly to himself. He thought he could see through Moore's scheme easily enough. He had made Mr. Grafton believe he was all right politically by lending him the money to help him in politics. Mr. Grafton, who, aside from his tendency to run off after impracticable ideas in politics, was an honest, straightforward man, and it was not difficult for a man of Moore's pleasing manners and standing as a business man to deceive him. It was quite evident to Mr. Spellbinder that Moore had woven his web around Mr. Grafton and that he was completely in his power. He thought to himself how quickly he would release Mr. Grafton from his money obligation to this unscrupulous man if he had the power to do so. But three thousand dollars was more money than the young State officer was able to raise, and therefore he was powerless to extend the relief that he would otherwise be glad to do. Breaking the silence which had lasted for several seconds, Mr. Spellbinder said in a very deliberate way:

"Mr. Grafton, my advice to you is to get that man out

of your house as soon as you can, and if it is a possible thing relieve yourself of the obligations you are under to him on account of the loan he made you. It will be better for you and better for your family. I think, under the circumstances, I have a right to say this much to you without violating any rule of propriety."

"I don't understand," replied Mr. Grafton with a painfully puzzled expression on his face.

"You take my word for it," said Mr. Spellbinder, "there is a mystery about that man. He bodes no good to you or yours."

"But he is going to let me have more money next fall, when, as you know, I am to be the fusion candidate for lieutenant-governor. I can't give him the cold shoulder unless I have good reasons for doing so, without disregarding my own interests," answered Mr. Grafton.

"If you don't," said Mr. Spellbinder, "you will wish you had and you can take my word for it."

This was said in a tone and manner that sent cold chills up and down Mr. Grafton's back. Here the conversation between them ended, and Mr. Spellbinder walked up to the house, while Mr. Grafton turned his attention to getting the horses ready to take him to the station.

When Mr. Spellbinder arrived at the house he found Virginia alone in the parlor, and he at once engaged her in conversation on the subject nearest his heart. He said:

"Miss Grafton, I am glad I have found you alone, for I desire to talk with you before I leave on a matter that was uppermost in my mind when I left Lincoln to visit your home. I almost feel that you divine what I would say."

"Hardly, Mr. Spellbinder," replied Virginia; "my powers of intuition are scarcely equal to that, I assure you."

"Then, I am to understand," answered Mr. Spellbinder, "that I have failed in my conversations with you in Lin-

coln and in my letters to you since then to convey to you what I really desired to do, the impression that I was really in love with you. I thought it proper to mention the matter to your father before making any declarations to you on the subject, and we have just had a conversation in which the matter was discussed. He informed me that I was probably too late; that you were practically if not formally engaged to Mr. Moore. May I be bold enough to ask you if this is true?"

"Of course I do not know what father may have meant by whatever remarks he made to you," she answered, "and I have no comment to make on what you intimate to me he did say; but I desire to say to you most emphatically that I am not engaged to Mr. Moore, nor am I engaged to any other man; and I wish to say further, in a perfectly frank and kindly way, that I have no desire to engage myself to any one at this time."

"I am delighted to hear this, Miss Grafton. I really inferred from what your father said to me that you were engaged to marry Mr. Moore. I may have misunderstood him—in fact, I doubtless did misunderstand him—"

"There, Mr. Spellbinder," interposed Virginia, at the same time raising her hands in protest, "please do me the kindness not to mention Mr. Moore's name in this connection. I have answered you frankly and fully already, and I think, finally."

Mr. Spellbinder hesitated a moment and then seemed about to speak, but restraining himself he held out his hand which she took, and without speaking another word they shook hands and parted.

Mr. Spellbinder bade Mrs. Grafton a hearty good-bye, and she urged him to come again to visit them whenever he might find it convenient to do so.

The leave-taking between Mr. Spellbinder and Mr.

Moore was noticeably formal. It was very apparent that they had conceived a positive dislike for each other.

On the way to the station Mr. Grafton tried several times to engage Mr. Spellbinder in conversation, but that gentleman seemed singularly disinclined to talk on any subject, even on politics. Once, however, he became interested when Mr. Grafton remarked that it would be better for men in debt if free coinage of silver could be brought about.

"I guess you're right about that," replied Mr. Spellbinder, "it would give you a chance to pay off that money you borrowed from Moore in fifty-cent dollars, provided you had any bullion to take to the mint to be coined into money. And I wish you had, by George, for I would like to see that rascal beaten out of about half that money he lent you in order to get you into his power."

"I have no desire," replied Mr. Grafton, "to beat anybody, and I don't know as it would be beating Moore to pay off the debt I owe him in legal tender. But I wish I did know for a certainty whether Mr. Bryan will be elected or not, and whether if he was elected Congress would pass a free-coinage act; I would manage some way to raise three thousand dollars, and I would buy silver bullion with it at the present price of forty-six cents an ounce. I would hold this until the free-coinage act went into effect and then I would take it to the mint and have it coined. I would get back over six thousand dollars, which would enable me to pay off the debt I owe Moore and have three thousand dollars left. That's how free-coinage would help me."

"Yes, but what would Moore say about it?" replied Mr. Spellbinder in a half-joking sort of way. "Do you think he would be satisfied to be paid back in dollars worth half of the dollars he let you have? Don't you think he would kick like a bay steer?"

"I don't see why he would. Wouldn't he have as many

dollars as I borrowed from him?" replied Mr. Grafton.

"Yes, but they would be depreciated dollars. Possibly you might say dishonest dollars," replied Mr. Spellbinder, who was in a mood to badger his friend Grafton a little. "Moore would think, if he didn't say it—and I think he'd say it—that he had been flim-flammed out of just fifteen hundred dollars."

Noticing that Mr. Grafton was looking at him in a curiously earnest way as if he was surprised at hearing such talk fall from the lips of a leader in the Populist party, and not desiring to make an entirely wrong impression on his mind, Mr. Spellbinder gave a chuckling laugh and said:

"Of course I am saying this to you and not to the public. I wouldn't have you repeat it as coming from me, and I don't want you to take what I have said too seriously for I have no desire to convert you into a gold-standard Republican," at which both laughed heartily.

After this Mr. Spellbinder became quite himself, and was as talkative as was his usual habit. He said to Mr. Grafton that there was a good deal in what the Republicans had to say about fifty-cent dollars, and he repeated to Grafton a conversation he had had with the President of the Grant Smelting Works in Omaha, which caused another laugh. Spellbinder told Grafton that this official who had always been a Republican informed him that he would like to see Bryan elected and would give a considerable sum toward the campaign fund to help the Populist cause. He said he didn't want to take an active personal part in the campaign, but he would quietly put up some money.

"But, what was his object in putting up the money for Bryan?" asked Mr. Grafton in an innocent sort of a way.

"Well," replied Spellbinder, "there is no secret about it; the Republicans have exploited it fully. The smelting

works had six hundred thousand dollars worth of silver bullion lying in their vault, and if Bryan was elected and a free-coinage law was passed it would double the value of their bullion, for they could take it to the mint and have it coined into over a million two hundred thousand silver dollars, thus making clear at least six hundred thousand dollars. It isn't hard to see, is it, that they could afford to put up a little money for Bryan to help bring about free-coinage?"

"A blind man could see that," replied Mr. Grafton. "I don't think the Republicans worked that point for all there was in it when they were pitching into the free coinage of silver at a ratio of 16 to 1. My uncle is interested in a silver mine in Mexico and he wrote me that the company was going to give ten thousand dollars for the campaign fund to help on the good cause; and I suspect the charges made by the Republicans were about correct that the silver-mine owners and bullion owners contributed more money to the Bryan fund than was obtained from any other source."

"Yes," said Mr. Spellbinder, "it would have been pretty close picking for us if it hadn't been for the silver-mine owners and large bullion holders. Since then they have turned their attention to mining for gold, and they have made so much more money out of it I don't believe they will take so much interest this year in the campaign."

They had reached the station, and while waiting for the train to arrive, Mr. Spellbinder in a very confidential way said to Mr. Grafton:

"Don't you borrow any more money from that fellow Moore, and pay off the debt you owe him, even if you have to make a sacrifice to do it, as soon as possible. If you can't do it otherwise, transfer the loan. I think I can get that amount of money for you at a reasonable rate of interest. At all events you must get out of the hands of Moore."

Mr. Grafton looked at Mr. Spellbinder in a most earnest way and acted like a man who felt that his private business was being pried into in a most impertinent manner. Whatever his thoughts were, he contented himself with saying:

"You don't seem to like Mr. Moore, and it seems to me you go further than you should to show it. Moore has been neighborly with me and helped me when he had an opportunity to do it."

"Yes, I know he helped you in a way," answered Mr. Spellbinder, "but he never would have done it if he hadn't thought that he could get you into his power by doing it. I don't want you to think that I'm impertinent and trying to stick my nose into your private affairs; and to satisfy you of this I will tell you something in confidence about this man, Moore. I cannot tell you all, for if I did it might possibly defeat the ends of justice. I will say this much to you, however; he is a dangerous man, and it will not be very long, I think, before you will have full proof of my statement. I thought I recognized him when I first met him at your house, but I was not quite sure of it until this morning. His photograph is in the hands of the officers in Lincoln at this time, and I am so sure that I am not mistaken in the identity of the man that I shall put the officers on to him as soon as I get back."

"You don't mean to say that he is a renegade from justice, do you?" exclaimed Mr. Grafton in a tone of voice that indicated a good deal of suppressed excitement.

"That is just exactly what I mean, Mr. Grafton, and I trust you will not say anything that will give him warning that he has been discovered," replied Mr. Spellbinder.

The train came, at this point in the conversation, and the two men shook hands and parted.

Mr. Grafton was in a not very comfortable state of mind

for the rest of the day. He felt confident that Mr. Spellbinder, who was a responsible man and a prominent State officer, would hardly make such a remark about a man situated as Mr. Moore was unless he believed what he said. Yet he could not dismiss the thought from his mind that Mr. Spellbinder was mistaken. At least he hoped so.

CHAPTER VII.

MR. MOORE WELL ENOUGH TO RETURN TO HIS OWN RANCH.

The day after Mr. Spellbinder's departure Mr. Moore announced his purpose to return to his "bachelor's den" on his ranch. He said he felt quite himself, and while he would be glad to prolong his stay with friends who had been so good to him, he felt that to stay longer would be imposing on hospitality. He expressed his thanks to Mrs. Grafton and Virginia for their motherly and sisterly care in the most felicitous words possible. His manner was so deferential and earnest, and his gratitude was so full of genuine feeling, that Mrs. Grafton was moved to tears, and Virginia realized, as she had never done before, that the man possessed unusual powers of fascination.

When he had expressed his gratitude and Mrs. Grafton had recovered her composure, he said:

"I will not feel satisfied to have been the beneficiary of all your kindness and helpfulness in my convalescence unless you will consent to receive from me a suitable compensation in money."

He was about to go on when Mrs. Grafton lifted up her hands in protest to his saying anything further. Virginia spoke up and said:

"Mr. Moore you are entirely welcome to what we have been able to do for you and we only regret that it was not in our power to do more. We cannot entertain the suggestion for a moment that you have just made."

"Certainly not," said Mrs. Grafton, "we could not think of doing such an unneighborly thing."

At this moment Mr. Moore's carriage appeared at the gate, and the man who had come every day from the ranch to see Mr. Moore and to bring such of his mail as needed his personal attention alighted and came up to the house. Mr. Moore met him at the door and told him that he was ready to go and that he would find his effects already packed in his room. While the man was carrying out Mr. Moore's instructions the latter pressed upon Mrs. Grafton and Virginia an invitation for them to ride over to his ranch with him in the carriage, as in this way they would make his departure from the Grafton home much pleasanter for him. They accepted the invitation and really enjoyed the ride over in Mr. Moore's rather stylish turnout. In fact the carriage was about the most luxurious one owned in the county, and the horses were probably as fine a team as there was in the State. The ride over to Mr. Moore's ranch was in every way pleasant, and Virginia thought she had never known Mr. Moore quite so brilliant and entertaining. As they were nearing the ranch Mr. Moore said:

"I trust you will do me the honor of inspecting my bachelor quarters. I have many times felt like inviting you over, but never was quite sure that you had enough interest in a bachelor's retreat to accept; and for this poor reason doubtless proved myself, in your estimation, very unneighborly and inhospitable."

Mrs. Grafton said they would be very pleased to accept his invitation.

When they entered the reception-room of the house they were surprised at its coziness and elegance. Indeed, as they passed from one room to another they were more and more surprised at the exquisite taste shown in the furnishings and appointments. The library was Mr. Moore's spe-

cial delight, and he called attention to it with an enthusiasm which showed that he was a true lover of books; and a mere glance at the well-filled shelves was sufficient to satisfy an intelligent observer that he was a man of refined taste and broad culture. Another room which he called his museum was filled with curios and bric-a-brac which he had collected in his extensive travels. He gave a running account of some of the most attractive objects in the collection which caused a half-hour to pass very quickly.

"Why!" said Virginia, "you never told us anything about these interesting curios and your fine library. It seems to me you have been strangely reticent about what you call your bachelor's den."

"And," added Mrs. Grafton, "you have said not a word about your housekeeper."

"I'm afraid," replied Mr. Moore, "that I have been more selfish than I should have been. There is danger of one's becoming too much of a recluse when he shuts himself up in his library on a ranch situated miles away from his neighbors. If I had thought, however, that you would have taken such a positive interest in my quarters, I assure you nothing would have given me more pleasure than to have had you visit them long ago and often. I shall not be so unneighborly in the future."

"But you haven't said anything about your housekeeper, of whom I inquired a moment ago," said Mrs. Grafton.

"I hope you do not think I have a woman housekeeper here," replied Mr. Moore, laughing.

"Everything is so neat and tidy one would be almost forced to the conclusion that there was a woman around somewhere," replied Mrs. Grafton.

"My housekeeper," replied Mr. Moore, "is a little Frenchman who knows how to do everything. He was my valet for a number of years when I devoted my time

to globe-trotting; and when I located here he astonished me by informing me that he knew how to cook and take care of a house. The truthfulness of his claim you have already attested, and I will fail in my duty to him not to fully agree with you. He certainly is as particular in his housekeeping as any one could be. In addition to all that he is a most excellent cook, and I hope to have the pleasure of giving you an opportunity to judge of his accomplishment in this direction some time very soon. He is the man who has been coming to see me every day while I was confined at your house. He insisted that I should come home instead of remaining there, boldly informing me that he was as good a nurse as anybody and that he could take care of me quite as well as anybody else. But I was too well contented where I was to think of yielding to his persuasive eloquence."

"You certainly do us a great honor and pay us a very high compliment, Mr. Moore," said Virginia.

"I only wish," earnestly replied Mr. Moore, "that you would allow me to pay you something more substantial than compliments," addressing himself particularly to Mrs. Grafton. He continued by saying:

"I have been thinking ever since you refused to accept money from me that I would be most happy if you would accept as a present from me, as a small token of my gratitude, the carriage and horses now awaiting your return home. I have another carriage and a buggy and plenty of horses, and do not need this rig; and I do hope you will accept it, not as compensation—oh! no—but as an expression of my regard and gratitude."

Mrs. Grafton gave signs of yielding to Mr. Moore's influence, and Virginia took the matter into her own hands by saying in a very emphatic, yet kindly way, that they could not think of accepting such a gift; that while they

fully realized he was in earnest and was prompted by the highest motive, yet they could not accede to his wish in the matter. And lest her mother might yet yield, Virginia arose and said they must be going, and led the way at once to the carriage.

On their way home Mrs. Grafton remarked to her daughter that she had never met a more delightful gentleman, nor a more appreciative and generous one than Mr. Moore.

Virginia, making no reply to this remark of her mother, the latter construed her silence to mean really what it did not, and she continued by saying:

"I am satisfied that Mr. Moore is greatly interested in you, Virginia, and while I don't desire to interfere with your choice of a husband, I feel quite sure he would make you a most excellent one, and I do hope you will give him encouragement."

"I agree with you, mother," replied Virginia, "that Mr. Moore is a very interesting man, and appears to have that charming quality of gratitude which must be admired in every one as a crowning virtue."

Mrs. Grafton seemed pleased with this answer, notwithstanding it was so general in its character. She would not have been so well pleased had she been able to read Virginia's thoughts. As a matter of fact the visit to Mr. Moore's house had accentuated, rather than diminished, Virginia's fear of this man. She had read the subtle workings of his countenance, and the conclusions she reached from her analysis were entirely satisfactory to her. She recognized the superior bearing of the man, his carefully selected words, his charming deference to ladies, his refined reserve, and cleverness in turning every point to his advantage without seeming to have any such purpose, but this fact did not envelop him in a disguise that was so com-

plete as to prevent Virginia from seeing through it and discerning something of the real character of the man. She saw how strangely her mother was fascinated by him, and she had discovered that her father for some reason was in his power. This only determined her the more to avoid the man as much as possible and to await developments.

Not long after this event Mr. Moore in his carriage overtook Virginia on her way from her school. He invited her to ride with him, which she consented to do. Mr. Moore was a good conversationalist and never lacked for something interesting and appropriate to say. Overtaking Virginia on her way from school suggested to his mind the circumstance of her having passed over a part of the road they were on the night when she so heroically led her school through the blizzard to a place of safety. He remarked:

"This is a very different evening from the one of the awful blizzard when you passed over a part of this road at the head of the column of children you were trying to save. Looking at the approaching sunset and the peaceful landscape, than which I never have seen anything more beautiful in any part of the world, one can hardly realize that this landscape was the theater of such a storm as that which swept over this community and brought sorrow and mourning to so many homes."

"I never allow myself to recall the fearful storms I have witnessed on the prairies when I am enjoying such an evening as this. I prefer to drink in the glorious ecstasy without attempting to make the picture more positive in its coloring by contrasting it with the effects produced by the wild and violent blizzard," replied Virginia.

His conversation all the way to her home was of the kind to intoxicate and entrance, but it fell short of that effect on Virginia. She recognized the gifts of the man, and the

treasures of exquisite knowledge he seemed able to weave about even the most commonplace subjects, to the delectation of his hearer, but the effect on her was simply intellectual.

When he assisted Virginia to alight at her home he begged her to allow him to call on her soon.

"It will give us all pleasure, Mr. Moore, to have you visit our home at any time," said Virginia in her usually frank and cordial manner.

Acting upon this invitation Mr. Moore drove over to the Grafton ranch the next evening. Mrs. Grafton and Virginia met him with pleasing cordiality, but it was noticed by Virginia, if not by Mrs. Grafton and their visitor, that Mr. Grafton's reception of Mr. Moore lacked its usual enthusiasm. Virginia ascribed this conduct on the part of her father to a slight indisposition of which he had been complaining, being in ignorance of the real cause. However, Mrs. Grafton and Virginia made it very pleasant for Mr. Moore, and the evening passed off enjoyably enough for that gentleman, notwithstanding his disappointment at not having an opportunity to broach the subject uppermost in his mind.

Mr. Grafton had very little to say during the evening, but just before Mr. Moore took his departure he asked him if he had read Mr. Bryan's great Fourth of July speech, delivered at Lincoln.

"No," replied Mr. Moore, "but I should like to, because I usually enjoy reading his speeches; they are always so eloquent."

"I'll be glad to let you have the speech," replied Mr. Grafton. "There are some things in it, however, that I do not like very much. One passage in particular it seems to me he might better have omitted. For example, in referring to the political battle of this year he said: 'The

fight this year will be to carry out the sentiment of that song we have so often repeated, 'My country 'tis of thee.' If we lose, our children and our children's children will not succeed to the spirit of that song, and celebrations of the Fourth of July will pass away; for the spirit of Empire will be upon us.'"

"What is there in that, Mr. Grafton, that you object to?" asked Mr. Moore.

"Well," replied Mr. Grafton, "it seems extravagant. If it means anything, it is intended to convey the idea that if Mr. Bryan is defeated the victors will be in favor of destroying the liberty and independence which we celebrate on the Fourth of July."

"Yes; that seems to be what he says," replied Mr. Moore.

"I'm a pretty good Populist," said Mr. Grafton, "and am a great admirer of Mr. Bryan and expect to vote for him, but I don't believe that Mr. McKinley and those who will oppose Mr. Bryan at the election would be in favor of anything that would take from us our liberty and independence. Every intelligent citizen would oppose any proposition or any measure looking to such a result. The Republicans love liberty and independence and the institutions of the country just as well as Democrats and Populists and Free Silverites. Everybody knows this; and however much one admires Mr. Bryan, he will be forced by his own conscience to regard the prediction as extravagant and foolish. Don't you think so?"

"It appears to me," replied Mr. Moore, "to be a rhetorical flight—a kind of political extravaganza on a small scale."

"Mr. Bryan," replied Mr. Grafton, "seems given to prophesying. He did a good deal of that four years ago in his speeches throughout the country, and because many of

his predictions utterly failed, thousands of people have lost confidence in him, and will not vote for him this fall. I am sorry to see him beginning so early in the campaign in the rôle of a prophet. I'm afraid it will do him no good."

"I rather agree with you, Mr. Grafton," answered Mr. Moore, "but I have always noticed that men who talk over much and indulge in flights of eloquence say things that won't bear the closest and most candid criticism."

CHAPTER VIII.

A LOVER'S DISAPPOINTMENT.

A few evenings after Mr. Moore's visit to the Graftons, described in the previous chapter, he was driving by, and observing Miss Grafton in the yard replacing straw about some valuable rose-bushes to prevent their budding too early for the late frosts, he stopped and very gallantly offered to relieve her of the work she was doing.

"I thank you, Mr. Moore," said Virginia, "but I have nearly finished my task, which I assure you was a pleasant one; for I feel in caring for these bushes which I set out with my own hands and have carefully nursed, much as a mother doubtless feels for her child when she does something for it to insure its greater comfort and safety. My work being done, will you not go with me to the house? Mother is there and she will be glad to see you."

"I trust you will pardon me," replied Mr. Moore, "for not accepting your invitation, which I would be glad to accept but for a business engagement at my ranch with some gentlemen from Chicago, who have probably arrived there ere now. Kindly convey to your lovely mother my kindest regards and explain to her why I did not pay my respects to her in person. I noticed you in the yard and I could not resist the temptation to speak to you. In fact I thought the opportunity presented itself for me to speak to you on a subject that is very near to my heart and which I intended to broach at our last meeting—"

"Had we better not go to the house, Mr. Moore?" Virginia answered in a way to suggest that she anticipated

words from Mr. Moore's lips that she would rather not have him utter.

Disregarding this suggestion, he moved close to her and in an earnest way said:

"Miss Grafton, I have at different times endeavored by suggestions and manner to impress on your mind the thought that I was deeply interested in you, aye, that I loved you, and lately I determined to declare openly and boldly my love and devotion for you—"

"I think," interposed Virginia, "we would better go to the—"

Paying no attention to Virginia's words and evident desire to go to the house, Mr. Moore continued:

"I will not multiply words, for I deem it quite unnecessary to do so with one of your intelligence and determined character, but I must in obedience to the demands of my heart say to you that I love you dearly and devotedly and would be glad to be able to make you my wife. I am sure I can make you happy. I have abundance of means and all will be laid at your feet. By your answer you can make me a happy or a miserable man."

Virginia listened attentively and respectfully until he had finished, and then calmly replied:

"I must say in all candor, Mr. Moore, that I consider your offer one not to be lightly brushed aside—indeed, one which any young woman might regard as an honor and a compliment to her. I so consider it; but, I must be as direct in my answer as you were pleased to be in making your offer." Here she hesitated, and her voice trembled a little with emotion, but she continued and said: "I cannot entertain your offer of marriage."

Mr. Moore was apparently much affected by her answer. He essayed to speak several times before he was able to control his voice. Finally he said:

"I am greatly disappointed. Perhaps I had no good grounds for expecting a favorable answer. It may be that I was blinded by my love for you. But I hope you will forgive me, Miss Grafton, if I have been too bold and presuming. Will you not give me some word of hope—some encouragement to believe that I may yet be able to change your decision?"

"I have but the one answer," she replied; "it cannot be."

"Then, farewell, Miss Grafton, I must give you full credit for knowing your mind and of being thoroughly sincere, and, therefore, I realize that it would be futile for me to press my suit further, at least at this time," said Mr. Moore.

She extended her hand which he took in his and pressed it to his lips.

As Virginia walked back to the house her thoughts were somewhat tempestuous and conflicting. She began to realize that she had had an offer of marriage from a very superior man—one whom almost any young woman would regard as a "good catch," and that she had rejected the offer. This fact agitated her as she had never been agitated before; and contrary to any experience she ever had in her life. She half repented a decision which she had made deliberately and felt certain when she made it that she had done what was for the best. This conflict in her mind was a new experience and made her feel that her will was not as strong as she had always thought it to be. She said to herself:

"I am glad it is over. I am sure that I did right. I could never marry that man. My soul rebels against the very thought. I really don't want to marry any man." Having given vent to her feelings in this way she felt better.

The reflections of Mr. Moore as he rode home were anything but comforting. Besides being grievously disappointed, his pride was stung. He felt humiliated. He fan-

ced that when he got ready to propose marriage to a lady the response would be not only favorable, but full of eagerness. To have been turned down by a country school teacher, the mere daughter of a homesteader, was really too much for his proud nature to bear with any degree of complacency. As he reached his ranch and was about to give his team into the hands of the stableman, he said to himself, and couched his thoughts in the slang of the cowboy:

“The round-up isn’t over yet. I’ll rope that heifer. She’s my maverick, and I’ll put my brand on her as sure as my name is—is—” for some reason or other he did not finish his sentence, but went hurriedly to the ranch office where he expected to meet some gentlemen from Chicago.

CHAPTER IX.

A MEAN PROPOSITION WHICH WAS PROMPTLY REJECTED.

A few days after the occurrence detailed in the previous chapter, Mr. Grafton was passing the Moore ranch on his way to the railroad station when he was hailed by Mr. Moore, who asked him to alight and come in and look at a lot of corn-fed steers which would be shipped to market in a few days. Mr. Grafton had a pronounced weakness for fat steers and he readily accepted the invitation. After looking the smooth, sleek animals over with a critical eye and noting their fine points, Mr. Grafton remarked:

"I would be mighty glad if I had as fine a lot of steers to market just at this time as these are. I think I would be a little easier than I am now, for it would enable me to pay off some debts I owe, especially the debt I owe you."

"Now, see here, my dear Grafton, you need not worry about that little sum of money I loaned you for campaign purposes. It is not such a big sum, and I am in no hurry about it, I assure you," said Mr. Moore in his most suave manner.

"That's all well enough, Mr. Moore, for you to say, but I owe it to you and you hold my note and a mortgage on my property, and I would feel a great deal happier if the debt was paid," replied Mr. Grafton.

"Since you have mentioned the matter, Mr. Grafton, I think I can suggest a way by which you can liquidate the debt quickly and easily, if you desire to do so," said Mr. Moore.

"How—what do you mean?" asked Mr. Grafton eagerly.

"I will be plain and direct with you, Mr. Grafton," replied Mr. Moore. "I let you have the money to aid you in your race for Congress. I wanted to see you get there, and I did what I could for you—" here he rather hesitated.

"Yes, I know you did," replied Mr. Grafton, "and I'm under lasting obligations to you for what you did, but what are you trying to get at?"

"Simply this," answered Mr. Moore, "I want to marry Miss Virginia. I love her more than I thought I could love any woman. I proposed to her last week and she flatly refused me. Now, if you will persuade her to change her mind, and marry me, I will cancel the debt you owe me. I have no doubt you can do this if you want to. Will you do it?" As he finished his extraordinary speech he seized Mr. Grafton's hand, and continued in the most beseeching way, "will you do it—will you do it, my friend?"

Mr. Grafton seemed dazed for a moment, but soon rallied, and with ill-concealed indignation, replied:

"Virginia is my daughter, Mr. Moore, but I have no right to dictate to her or to attempt to dictate to her in a matter of this kind. If she refused you, the matter must rest there unless she voluntarily changes her mind."

"I'm surprised, Mr. Grafton, that you would let a girl's caprice stand in the way of such an advantage as I generously offer you," said Mr. Moore.

"See here, Moore, you have mistaken your man. I may be a blamed fool as some of my neighbors say I am, in politics, but when it comes to my daughter's rights and happiness I am a Grafton of good old Virginia stock. I wouldn't try to persuade my daughter to marry you or any other man she had refused to marry any quicker than I would be unmanly or indecent towards her."

"It's an easy way to pay a debt, Grafton," replied Moore in a somewhat taunting way.

"Not for me—not for me," quickly replied Mr. Grafton. "If it was three million instead of three thousand dollars it would be all the same. My daughter's happiness is more to me than money."

"I hope you will never have occasion to regret your rejection of my offer, Grafton," answered Moore.

Mr. Grafton drove on his way in rather an uneasy state of mind. He was satisfied with himself for the stand he had taken, and had nothing to regret for anything he had said to Moore. In fact it was the only stand a manly father could take under such circumstances. But to his mind the conversation foreshadowed evil to him and his family. He had come to regard Moore as a mysterious, and in some sense, a dangerous character. He could not explain to himself why, except it was because of what Mr. Spellbinder had said to him. At all events, there was but one thing for him to do and that was to get the money together in some way and pay off the debt he owed Moore. He went so far in the analysis of the disagreeable predicament in which he found himself as to say that he was a stupendous fool for allowing his name to be used as a candidate for Congress. He said to himself:

"I was an idiot for doing it. Politics don't pay, and as soon as I get out of this scrape and get through running for lieutenant-governor, I'll be done with the whole business. I have fooled away time and money enough on politics, and I'll quit as soon as I'm elected lieutenant-governor. It isn't every man that can write a book on a campaign in which he was defeated—a kind of an elaborate obituary on himself, as Mr. Bryan did, and get rich out of it. A good many of us farmers spend our time and money making the political pot boil only to enable smarter cooks to boil their potatoes in. I believe that there was a good deal of truth in what Spellbinder said jokingly—but jokes are sometimes

half truth—when he said that the farmers and laboring men in the West who had no silver mines or bullion stored away hadn't much reason to be spending their time whooping it up for free silver, for they would have to work just as hard to get silver dollars as any other kind, and when they got them maybe they wouldn't be worth more than fifty cents on the dollar. Blamed if I see much in politics anyway."

Mr. Grafton had worked himself into a strange confusion of ideas and a most uncomfortable state of mind by the time he reached the station. He put up his horses and went over to his favorite trading-place, on which was a conspicuous sign which read:

"THE FARMER'S ANTI-MONOP. AND CO-OP. STORE."

After doing his trading he went down to the court-house to meet some of the county officers who were leading Populists in the county, and he found that the old soldiers were holding a reunion in the court-house and court-house yard.

Although he had been a Confederate soldier from Missouri, he believed in the union of the Blue and the Gray, and maintained very fraternal relations with the Union soldiers of the county. In fact, one of his main objections to William Jennings Bryan as a candidate for office was that he had never shown himself to be particularly interested in the old soldiers. The explanation made by the old veterans that Mr. Bryan's father was a bitter opponent of President Lincoln and his war policy, and that this fact accounted for the indifference of William Jennings for the Union soldiers, was not calculated to help Mr. Grafton over his difficulty in giving his undivided support to the brilliant son.

He mixed in with the boys in blue and crowded his way up as near to the platform as he could, from which General Paul Vandervoort, a middle-of-the road Populist, and a great reunion orator was speaking. The General had been

orating a little while before Mr. Grafton came up, but he was able to hear quite a good deal of the speech notwithstanding. The General was saying:

"I'll tell you, boys, we want to vote as we shot—straight at the enemy. Bryan was in Congress for four years from Nebraska—a soldier State—and what did he say or do for the soldiers during that time? I have been unable to find in the Congressional Record a single law or an amendment to a law, in the interest of the soldiers, which was proposed by him. I have been unable to find reported in the Congressional Record a single speech made by Bryan on the floor of Congress supporting any measure looking to the interest of the Union veterans. I have searched in vain in the Record for a speech delivered by him defending the Union soldier against the vile attacks of Democrats. He sat in his seat silent as a clam when Jones of Virginia and Talbot of South Carolina were making the Union soldier the subject of severest and most unjust criticism. When the Democrats charged that the Union pensioners were looting the Treasury, and that they were no better than highway robbers, Bryan opened not his mouth. He sat and heard the abuse of the soldiers of his own State and gave consent by his silence. He was no friend of the soldiers then, and if we judge righteously by what he has been, he will be no friend to the Union soldier if he is elected President. All of the men who have insulted the Union veteran time and again in Congress, and always cast their votes against him, are rampant supporters of Bryan for President. These men come for the most part from ten States of the Union, where half of the people are governed without their consent, and they will run Bryan as President precisely as they did when he was in Congress. We had better trust the party which has put on the statute-books every law ever enacted for the benefit of the Union

soldier. We had better not run off after strange gods, as too many of us did when we voted against Comrade Harrison for Cleveland. We got our reward then in vetoes and in seeing comrades turned out of office simply because they were Republicans and Union veterans; and as sure as there is a God in Heaven we will get the same kind of reward if we help elect Bryan President. Let us stay in the house of our friends and we will be given bread instead of stones.

"Bryan quotes a good deal from the sainted Lincoln in the hope of fooling somebody. He would make the people believe that the mantle of that great man has fallen upon his shoulders. He says that Lincoln was in favor of the plain people, and so is he; but, he does not tell you that Lincoln once said: 'You can fool all of the people a part of the time, a part of the people all of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time.' If that wise saying of the sainted Lincoln ever applied to a man and a party it applies to Bryan and to the conglomerate party whose candidate for President he is.

"He does not tell you that the sayings and doings of Lincoln when he was President were denounced and belittled by the organized Democracy of the North, and unless Bryan is an entirely different man from what his father was, had he lived then, he would have been as staunch a supporter of Vallandigham as was Judge Silas Bryan, from whose loins William Jennings sprang. Bryan would have been prominent among the men referred to by Mr. Lincoln in 1863, when he said:

"'He who dissuades one man from volunteering or induces one soldier to desert, weakens the cause as much as he who kills an American soldier in battle. Must I shoot a simple-minded soldier boy who deserts, while I must not touch a hair of a wily agitator who induces him to desert? This is none the less injurious when effected by getting a

father or mother or friend into a public meeting and there working upon his feelings till he is persuaded to write the soldier boy that he is fighting in a bad cause, for a wicked administration of a contemptible Government. I think that, in such a case, to silence the agitator and save the boy is not only Constitutional, but withal a great mercy.'

"William Jennings Bryan, the agitator, never quotes this language of President Lincoln. If he did, he would be striking too near home. This language was spoken in 1863, yet it applies to William Jennings Bryan, of to-day, as it did to the copperheads of that day. The Bryan of to-day is encouraging our soldiers to desert in the Philippines, by persuading them to believe that they are waging war for an unholy cause. He is saying in his speeches substantially to Aguinaldo and his followers who are firing on the United States flag and ambushing our soldiers whenever they can: 'Be of good cheer; hold out a little longer, and, if I am elected President, I'll withdraw the United States army, haul down the American flag and let you have your own way.'

"What more did the copperheads do from 1861 to 1865 than this? Did they not say to Jeff Davis and his followers, 'Hold out a little longer; be of good cheer—we will elect a President who will obey the Constitution, and let you go in peace'? Did not the copperheads write letters to soldiers who were battling at the front encouraging them to desert by telling them that they were exposing their lives for a 'wicked administration of a contemptible Government'? Did they not obstruct every measure proposed by President Lincoln and those supporting him in order to defeat the Union cause? This is history, boys. Will you, with your eyes open, vote for a man who by his speeches is encouraging the men who are firing on Old Glory in the Philippines and shooting down your sons, and is thereby

emulating the copperheads of 1861 to '65?" ("No, no," went up a shout from the throng, "we'll never do that.")

"See that you don't," cried the speaker in a louder voice. "Stand together for your own rights and welfare; stand by Old Glory; stand for the principles for which you fought four long years; stand by the party that stood by you in those bloody days; stand for Comrade McKinley, who stood by us, shoulder to shoulder, and who has stood for the welfare of the old soldier from that day to this."

At the close of General Vandervoort's speech three rousing cheers were given for Comrade McKinley and Comrade Vandervoort, friends of the old veteran.

CHAPTER X.

A CRISIS IN THE GRAFTON HOME.

On his way home Mr. Grafton endeavored to settle in his own mind whether he would speak of what had occurred between him and Mr. Moore to his wife and daughter or not. He felt it his duty to impart to them everything involving the happiness of the family, yet he did not want to give them unnecessary anxiety and worry. He had kept from them the money transaction between himself and Moore, and it had been a source of humiliation and trouble to him because he did so. The folly of this was now emphasized by the trouble which had grown out of it to him, and seemed likely to be the fruitful source of misery to his wife, and especially to Virginia. He was in a state of indecision on the subject when he arrived at the ranch.

After supper the family repaired to the cozy sitting room as was their custom, and Virginia read to her parents as she was wont to do, and as Mr. Grafton really expected her to do. She had not read long, however, when Mr. Grafton, whose mind had not really been on the subject of the magazine article she was reading, stopped her and said he desired to tell them something of importance which was occupying his mind to the exclusion of every other subject. This unusual proceeding caused Mrs. Grafton and her daughter to look at Mr. Grafton in surprise. He went on to tell them the whole story in detail. After he had finished he looked at his wife and then at his daughter with an expression of pain and anxiety on his face, which they had never seen there before, and which caused them to feel some alarm.

Virginia arose and crossed the room to her father and

folded her arms about his neck in a most gentle and loving manner. Looking him affectionately in the face she said:

"My dear father, I beg you not to allow this experience to make you unhappy. You showed your love for me and your true manhood in spurning the unmanly proposition of Mr. Moore. While I am sorry you owe him a dollar, still all you do owe him can be paid. We may be compelled to make some sacrifices to discharge the obligation, yet it must be done. Then we shall be free of him. Do not worry, my dear father; mother and I are well and strong, and we shall be perfectly willing to bear our share of the sacrifice, whatever it may be, in order to pay the debt we owe this man, who has shown, I think, his real character."

Mrs. Grafton was in tears when Virginia had finished her truly womanly speech, but she quickly rallied and said:

"Virginia has given utterance to my own thoughts, and has expressed my feelings better than I could have done for myself. We will pay this debt, and thus be done with this man."

Mr. Grafton was a brave man when it was necessary to be brave; and like most men of real courage he was easily touched by gratitude and sympathy. His love for his wife and daughter and the consciousness that he was about to bring trouble upon them made him weak for the time being, but the courageous speech of his daughter, seconded by his wife, and the generous sympathy they manifested toward him aroused within him the true elements of his nature. With an emphatic gesture he said:

"The debt shall be paid, and we shall be under no obligations to a man who had the audacity to propose that I sell my daughter for money. Oh! I should have brained him on the spot!"

"No, my dear husband," said his wife, "it is better just as it is—I am glad you dealt with the matter precisely as you did."

Virginia's eyes seemed ablaze with indignation, and for

the moment the blood of her Virginia ancestors got the better of her and she really agreed with her father that he should have brained the man without hesitation. But a few moments afterwards she repented of this speech and declared that her mother was right, as she always was, and that her father acted wisely and well.

At this juncture in the conversation there was a knock at the front door, and Mr. Grafton at once answered the call. A well-dressed gentleman, with a young and attractive face, stood before him when he opened the door.

"Will you come in, sir," said Mr. Grafton, in a very cordial and hospitable voice.

"I beg your pardon," said the gentleman, "is this Mr. Grafton?"

"Yes, sir, I'm Mr. Grafton, will you do me the pleasure to come in?"

"I am Mr. Van Kirk, of New Jersey," he replied, "with whom you have had some correspondence. I regret very much to have taken you by surprise. It was not my intention at all, but it came about through a misunderstanding on my part in sending you a telegram of my coming. I did not realize that there would be delay in your receiving a telegram, else I would have written a letter, instead, in time for you to get it."

"We're certainly glad to see you, Mr. Van Kirk," replied Mr. Grafton, and taking his hand he extended a generous welcome by half drawing him inside of the door.

Mr. Van Kirk informed Mr. Grafton that the man who had brought him out was in the buggy at the gate and that he had better go and dismiss him.

"I'll attend to that, Mr. Van Kirk," said Mr. Grafton. "Take off your overcoat, and I will show you into the sitting-room where Mrs. Grafton and my daughter are." He conducted Mr. Van Kirk into the sitting-room and introduced him to the ladies, and then hurried out to look after the man who had brought Mr. Van Kirk from the railroad station. His purpose was to have the man stay all night

at the ranch rather than drive back to the station, and he said to him:

"I would like to have you stay all night with us."

"No," said the man, "I will have to go back to-night, as it is the orders. I can get back easy enough by ten o'clock."

"I would like to have you stay if you can do so," cordially replied Mr. Grafton.

"Oh! no thank you, I'll be off. That's an awful fine man I brought out here, Mr. Grafton. He must be a rich feller, for he give me ten dollars besides payin' the regular price for the rig, and he's about the most interestin' feller I ever heerd talk." After delivering himself of this encomium on Mr. Van Kirk, in his homely way, he started off indulging in a merry whistle as he left.

Mr. Grafton returned to the house and found the stranger in an easy conversation with his wife and daughter. He seemed to be already at home and Mrs. Grafton and Virginia instead of thinking the stranger too bold really enjoyed the elegance of his familiar conversation and manner. Mr. Grafton very soon shared the feelings of his wife and daughter, for he, too, quickly came within the charm of Mr. Van Kirk's conversation. Though hardly conscious of the fact, Mr. Van Kirk was really a perfect master of the art of conversation and pleasing address, so that even strangers who came within the sphere of his influence never failed to feel at ease.

Mr. Grafton joined in the conversation, and the evening passed away so quickly that it was a matter of regret to all. The prejudice which Mr. Grafton had conceived for Mr. Van Kirk because he came from New Jersey and was endorsed so strongly by bank presidents and heads of trusts, had nearly vanished before the evening was half over, and Mrs. Grafton and Virginia were both charmed with him. Considering what soon followed the acquaintance thus so happily begun between Mr. Van Kirk and the Graftons, it may be readily assumed that the former was no less pleased

with at least one of the Grafton family than they were with him.

Mr. Van Kirk was installed in the bedroom off the parlor which had been occupied by Mr. Moore during his convalescence from the painful effects of his exposure to the blizzard. Somewhat to the astonishment of Mr. Van Kirk he found the room quite to his liking. It was furnished neatly and in some respects, richly, and compared favorably with his own bedroom in his more pretentious home in Trenton. This evidence of refined taste made him feel that the Graftons were very different from those pictured by people in the Eastern States as living on farms and ranches in the far West, who seem not to have learned from their reading that in many of the ranch and farm homes, even on the cattle-ranges of Wyoming and Montana, may be found the highest order of culture. Of course Mr. Van Kirk very promptly ascribed this proof of refinement in the Grafton home largely to Virginia, who was growing upon him rapidly as a prodigy in all that was extraordinary in woman. He had pictured her completely in his imagination before he saw her; that is, he had fancied her to be what he would really like to have her be, and strange as it may seem, she proved to be the counterpart of his vision. With this rather remarkable beginning it was not at all surprising that she should unfold, so to speak, like a beautiful flower to charm and to satisfy. The difficulties with Mr. Van Kirk were external to himself—difficulties which he feared he would not be able to overcome. He loved Virginia. The anxious question which already began to torture his heart was, "Would Virginia return his love?" This thought made his heart beat faster than usual, and for the first time in his life he was timid to the point of cowardice.

A very dainty and satisfying breakfast was served in the cozy dining room, and Mr. Van Kirk declared he had never enjoyed a meal more in his life. It was so apparent that Mr. Van Kirk was enjoying every moment of his visit at the Grafton home that Mr. and Mrs. Grafton had already ad-

mitted to each other that they were heartily glad to have him for a guest. Virginia had said very little about the visitor to her parents, but it was plain to be seen that she, too, was glad to have him with them.

Virginia's duties at the school compelled her to be absent from home most of the day, and she informed Mr. Van Kirk that her father would esteem it an honor and pleasure to take him in the spring wagon and show him the farms and ranches, where the finest stock was to be seen, and she thought he would be able to entertain him pleasantly, and perhaps profitably for several days.

"Yes," said he, "I shall be interested in seeing the large farms and ranches of which I have heard so much, and will no doubt find much to entertain and profit me."

Mr. Van Kirk expressed himself as highly pleased when Mr. Grafton informed him that they would take Virginia to her school before starting on their rounds. The vast prairie, which rolled away as far as the eye could see, like the mighty ocean, was a picture in itself which excited the admiration of Mr. Van Kirk and called forth from him exclamations of surprise and admiration. He remarked upon the extensive and fine improvements he observed on some of the ranches, and was much interested in the sod houses which still stood not far from the more modern improvements as monuments to the humble beginning of many of the ranchmen. The pretty groves of soft maple and walnut trees so evenly planted and so uniform in size, he thought, made up a relief to the landscape worthy of the brush of a master. These groves were planted for the protection of houses and barns and corrals, and their vigorous growth and healthy appearance gave evidence of the strength of the soil and what man may accomplish by intelligent effort and persevering industry. The vastness of the prairie seemed to excite his wonder most and he said:

"The prairie is simply bewildering in its grandeur and vastness."

"So this is the little schoolhouse of which I have read

so much in connection with the awful blizzard, and a certain little heroine whose courage and intelligence saved from death an entire school," exclaimed Mr. Van Kirk, as they drove up to the little schoolhouse.

"Yes," replied Mr. Grafton, "this is the schoolhouse, and here come the same children."

The school children came trooping out towards them, with eyes beaming with gladness and cheeks ruddy with health and happiness, unmindful of the stranger, with apparently but one thought, and that was to get near the teacher. As she alighted they gathered around her and gave her a hearty welcome. "Good morning, dear teacher," "good morning, dear teacher," they cried as they pressed up to her to receive her kind words of greeting, and to get within the charm of her smile. She caressed several of the younger ones who nestled up close to her, as if they were anxious for her blessing.

"Children, this gentleman is Mr. Van Kirk who is visiting in our neighborhood," said the teacher.

They courtesied prettily and said, "welcome are you, sir, to our neighborhood."

Bidding Virginia and the children good-bye Mr. Grafton and Mr. Van Kirk took their departure. The latter recalled that on their way to the schoolhouse they met a spanking team hitched to a single road wagon and driven by a man who seemed perfectly at home behind fast step-pers. Mr. Van Kirk had noticed that both Mr. Grafton and Virginia bowed formally to the man, and that he had returned the bow in equally as formal a manner. Mr. Van Kirk also noticed that as they passed the man fixed his eyes very intently on him. This was so noticeable that it produced a rather strange effect on him. It was not the gaze of an impudent man, but rather that of envious scrutiny.

"That was a very fine turnout, Mr. Grafton, we passed on our way to the schoolhouse," remarked Mr. Van Kirk soon after they had left the schoolhouse.

"Yes, that was Mr. Moore, a wealthy ranchman whose place is not far from my ranch," answered Mr. Grafton. "He is a breeder of very fine horses and prides himself on knowing how to break and handle them."

After this remark, Mr. Grafton, without intending to be discourteous, said nothing further about Mr. Moore, and Mr. Van Kirk, noticing that his companion did not seem desirous of continuing the subject pressed him no further, although he was really curious to know more of the man.

The ride was full of interest and genuine delight to Mr. Van Kirk, who said he had never breathed purer air, fuller of ozone, had never seen a country more beautiful to look at, and had never seen finer horses and cattle and hogs. He talked about all he saw in a way to surprise Mr. Grafton, who had supposed that a wealthy young man from New Jersey would hardly know a horse from a steer. In this he was agreeably mistaken, for Mr. Van Kirk seemed to know all about both, and talked about the fine points of both horses and cattle in a way to interest and instruct Mr. Grafton. The fact was Mr. Van Kirk had several fine stock farms, small in size compared with the ones he had been visiting, and had given to the subject of breeding horses, cattle and hogs, special and scientific attention. As they were nearing the ranch of Mr. Grafton on their return, Mr. Van Kirk noticed the fine improvements on Mr. Moore's ranch, and in one of the corrals some specimens of Short Horns, and in another corral some most beautiful Clydesdale horses, and noticing that Mr. Grafton was not driving into the lane leading up to the house and barn he asked if they could not spend a half hour or so inspecting this ranch. Mr. Grafton replied that he was in somewhat of a hurry to return home, but that he thought they could spare a half hour at least in looking over the stock. Mr. Grafton really had no desire to meet Moore, but he yielded gracefully and without any manner of protest to Mr. Van Kirk's wish, and drove up to the house. Mr. Moore came out and greeted them very cordially, and took more than

his usual pains in showing them around the barns and sheds and corrals, and in having some of the finest specimens of his horses and cattle exhibited to their best advantage. Mr. Van Kirk expressed great pleasure at what he had seen, and complimented Mr. Moore very highly on the character of his improvements and the excellence of his stock.

After Mr. Moore had shown them what he had at the barn, he extended them a cordial invitation to go into the house, which was accepted with the suggestion by Mr. Grafton that they expected to make a brief call simply to look over some of his fine horses and cattle, and with no intention of making a visit. Mr. Moore said he would be gratified to have them stay, even for a few minutes. There was nothing in Mr. Moore's conduct towards Mr. Grafton to indicate that he had any lingering ill feeling towards him on account of the result of their last interview. In truth, Mr. Grafton thought that his neighbor made an unusual effort to be agreeable. When they had entered the house, Mr. Moore led them to his lounging room and set out cigars and invited them to smoke. Mr. Grafton was fond of a fine cigar and lighted one and under its quieting influence became more resigned to making a short visit with Mr. Moore. Mr. Van Kirk did not smoke, but seemed very much pleased to meet a gentleman of Mr. Moore's general information and knowledge of the world. He was also much interested in the many curios artistically placed in this room for its ornamentation. There were guns and revolvers and knives of every kind and description hung about the room which gave it the air of an armory. These articles of warfare Mr. Moore had collected from all parts of the world, and took great pleasure in giving the history of each specimen. Mr. Van Kirk was no less interested in the library which Mr. Moore seemed to take special pleasure in showing to him. The effect of the twenty minutes' visit on Mr. Van Kirk's mind was that he had found in the person of Mr. Moore a very remarkable character. He did

not communicate the fact to Mr. Grafton that while Mr. Moore had proven very interesting, yet he brought away with him an impression that was not altogether favorable to Mr. Moore.

Mr. Moore pressed Mr. Van Kirk to honor him with another call before he left the neighborhood. The latter naturally expected Mr. Grafton to invite Mr. Moore in return to call on his visitor at his house, and was somewhat surprised as well as disappointed that no such invitation was given. Mr. Van Kirk fancied he saw resentment and annoyance on the face of Mr. Moore on account of it, but he said nothing to Mr. Grafton about it after they left. He did say, however, that he was surprised to find a bachelor with such splendid quarters on a western ranch; that Mr. Moore himself was an interesting study.

"Has Mr. Moore been in this neighborhood very long?" asked Mr. Van Kirk.

"About six years," replied Mr. Grafton, "and during this time he has not cultivated the acquaintance of a single family except my own. He does most of his business through a superintendent who has an office on the place, and who is as strangely unsociable, except in matters of business, as Mr. Moore himself. Mr. Moore attempted to reach the schoolhouse the night of the blizzard in the hope of being of some service to my daughter in rescuing the school but he lost his way and nearly lost his life in the undertaking. We took him to our home and nursed him until he had fully recovered from the effects of his exposure to the storm. He proved himself to be a very interesting person, and we came to think a good deal of him. Since that, however, I have had a reason to dislike and distrust him."

Mr. Van Kirk had the good judgment and tact to pursue the subject no further.

Dinner was ready when they arrived at the Grafton ranch, and Mr. Van Kirk remarked to Mrs. Grafton that he thought he had acquired an appetite by his delightful ride

with her husband that would enable him to do full justice to the meal.

"I am glad you feel so, Mr. Van Kirk," replied Mrs. Grafton, "for it gives every housewife a pleasure to cater to good appetites. We usually have a good supper on account of my daughter, who is obliged to take her dinner to school in a pail, and she generally feels quite hungry when she returns home."

"I must say, if you will pardon me," replied Mr. Van Kirk, "that you have a most remarkable daughter. Her wonderful pluck and intelligence in saving her school is the subject of enthusiastic comment all through the East. She is better known almost than any other woman, and I do believe better beloved. The American people almost deify any one who heroically saves the life of a single child, and it is not to be wondered at that they have deified one who saved a whole school. Since coming here and becoming acquainted with her I am impressed more than ever with her grand character. And to know that this justly celebrated young lady is so truly democratic as to carry her dinner to her school in a tin pail, and prefers to walk to and from her school, adds immensely to the interest, if not the romance, with which her life is invested. Surely an interesting novel could be written, with her as the heroine."

"I certainly hope no such literary effort will be attempted," answered Mrs. Grafton. "Virginia simply dreads notoriety. She was very much put out by a magazine article, describing the part she took in the blizzard, and using as an illustration her photograph which the writer of the article obtained from a photographer in Lincoln without her knowledge."

"People who do great things," said Mr. Van Kirk, "are as a rule, I think, too sensitive. Great deeds of men and women really belong to the public and should be told in song and story to stimulate others to try and rise above mediocrity."

After a lull in the conversation Mr. Van Kirk remarked that Nebraska had another well known person for a citizen.

"I refer to Mr. Bryan," said Mr. Van Kirk, "who has been in the public eye and in the public press more constantly for several years than any other young man in the country."

"Yes," replied Mr. Grafton, who had come in from the barn and who had heard the last remark of Mr. Van Kirk, "the State is highly honored by having such a citizen. He is not an old timer among us but he has stirred up things in the State politically more than any other man in it. He is a great man, I think. When he first came to the State he began to make speeches on the tariff and the interest he injected into that dry old question brought him into prominence at once. I suppose he made more converts to free trade than any hundred men in the country. I have sat under his eloquence when he was discussing the tariff question and I tell you he aroused every drop of blood in me, and made me feel like a young soldier under the inspiring influence of martial music. I was ready to be led into the very front of the battle against the robber barons, who were pictured by Mr. Bryan as they had never been pictured before, as high-handed robbers of a helpless people. The hard knocks he gave high tariff are felt to this day in this part of the country. His tariff speeches landed him in Congress, and I believe if the silver question hadn't come up his reputation as a tariff debater would have landed him in the White House. As it was he came near getting there by his great 16-to-1 campaign. This time I believe he'll make it on the anti-trust, anti-expansion and anti-imperialism issues. I have an idea he will stir things up more than ever on these questions. He is a gifted man, I tell you. He can take up a question that doesn't seem to have anything in it and make more out of it than any man I ever heard talk. I declare until I read some of his speeches I had thought that expansion would be a good thing for the

country. In fact, Bryan's influence was what got the Democrats in the Senate to vote for the ratification of the Paris Treaty. It would have been defeated if it hadn't been for his great influence, and I was surprised when he turned around and began to denounce the Republicans for doing just what he had influenced the Democrats to do. He's pretty sharp, and it looks to me like he wanted to put McKinley in a hole in order to get a better chance at him. Everything's fair in politics, you know."

"Yes," answered Mr. Van Kirk, "I suppose so, but it seems to me that a little more of honesty and sincerity in politics would be better for the country in the long run. There is really too much demagogism in politics to assure stability to our institutions. Political success seems to be the aim of most politicians regardless of the means to achieve it. There is one thing to be deplored especially, and that is the effort of some men, from whom one would expect better things, to persuade the farmers and laborers of the country that their lot is a hard one, and that certain men who are enterprising and successful in projecting and carrying out large schemes in railroading and manufactures, indeed, various kinds of financial operations, are oppressing them and bent on keeping them from getting reasonable prices for their commodities and their labor. Thus they generate a feeling of discontent, and bitterness in one part of the community against another, which is no more nor less than a condition of anarchy. My idea is that the truth ought to be recognized and admitted. The whole country is in a high state of prosperity. The reports from every kind of enterprise show this to be true. The common laborers are getting higher wages than they ever got before in this country, and higher than are received by the laborers of any country; everything produced by farmers and stock raisers brings high prices; the manufacturing output of the country is larger than ever before, and while margins of profits are close, manufacturers seem well satisfied. And when you consider in connection with

this that everybody who earns and gets a dollar is able to realize on that dollar a hundred cents everywhere, it would seem that there is very little just cause of complaint. This is the simple way I look at the condition of things, without stopping to consider how it will affect any party."

"What party do you belong to, may I ask?" said Mr. Grafton.

"Well, I have always voted the Republican ticket," answered Mr. Van Kirk, "but I have not been at all active in any party."

"I suppose you are in favor of trusts," said Mr. Grafton, "living as you do in New Jersey?"

"I hardly know how to answer your question, Mr. Grafton, as the name 'trusts' is rather indefinite and somewhat ambiguous. If you mean a combination of capital to carry out certain enterprises that would not be undertaken by an individual, I am certainly in favor of trusts of that kind. For example, not long ago ten of my friends, including myself, put in ten thousand dollars apiece for the purpose of establishing a tannery for making leather by a new process which seemed to me to be a good one, and would enable the concern to manufacture leather a great deal cheaper than by the old methods of tanning. Not one of the number who went into this would have risked a hundred thousand dollars in the new venture, but each one was willing to risk ten thousand. The result of this venture has been that we are now producing a good quality of leather equal to almost any on the market, so that we are able to sell our product a good deal cheaper than the same quality of leather was ever sold before. Our success led to the organization of another trust, in which I put ten thousand dollars with nineteen other men who each put in a like sum. With this capital we established a shoe factory, which has given employment to three hundred persons from the day it was opened. Manufacturing our own leather cheaply, and using the most modern machinery and

some new inventions which had never been used before, enable the factory to turn out the very best and finest shoes at a lower cost than they were ever manufactured at before. The general effect of this is the lowering of prices of shoes to consumers. Assuredly in this case two trusts are doing good, by furnishing to men, women and children shoes at a lower cost. Another good effect is that other shoe manufacturers in the country were compelled to put in newer and more economical machinery in order to compete with us. This increases the demand for labor by enlarging the demand for a better class of machinery. As you know, the prices of shoes are now lower than ever before. I have heard my father say that when he was a boy it was impossible for the rich to get as good and stylish shoes as are now within the reach of all; that a much inferior grade of shoes cost them at least thirty per cent more. All through the country there are building and loan associations which are trusts, and certainly no one can raise his voice against a trust of this character. In fact, as I have studied the question of trusts I find that not more than one trust out of twenty-five is objectionable. But as I understand it, all political parties, as well as nearly every individual, are in favor of such laws as shall regulate and control objectionable trusts. At least I am, and I am absolutely unacquainted with a single person in the East, where I live, who disagrees with me. When I read some of the sensational articles in the newspapers about the terrible calamities they will bring on the country, I am simply amazed at the audacity and presumption of the writers. It strikes me that they presume upon the ignorance of their readers. I don't really know of a single trust that is injuring the people. What trust is there, Mr. Grafton, that is injuring you or the farmers of this State?"

"I—I don't just now think of any one," answered Mr. Grafton, "but it's the proposition, the principle of the thing—that is, we are putting up a fight against the idea—the

principle, for fear there might be trusts created that would hurt people."

"Well, then," replied Mr. Van Kirk, "it's not something that is really in existence which you are striking at in the Kansas City Platform so much as at the idea or principle involved. It may be well enough to agitate for political purposes an idea that something may happen and that therefore we ought to be prepared to guard against it, yet it seems to me that this sort of politics is a little premature. What do you think of the trust the farmers and wool growers of Texas have formed for the purpose of enabling them to hold certain crops and wool clip for better prices?"

"I think it's all right for the farmers and wool growers to form a combination of this kind for their self-protection," answered Mr. Grafton.

"Then you are not opposed to the idea or principle in certain cases?" observed Mr. Van Kirk.

"Well, no," replied Mr. Grafton, "I'm not opposed to laboring men forming societies for the purpose of keeping up the price of labor and in regulating the hours of labor, and I think the farmers and stock raisers ought to combine for the purpose of keeping up prices on the commodities they produce, but I'm down on trusts like the Standard Oil Company, for instance."

"Isn't it true, Mr. Grafton," said Mr. Van Kirk, "that the entire country has been benefited by the operations of the Standard Oil Company?"

"Well, I'm bound to admit, Mr. Van Kirk," said Mr. Grafton, "that I'm able to buy coal oil now for eight cents a gallon, and I used to have to pay thirty-five cents a gallon for oil that was not half as good. But what I object to is that the Standard Oil Company should be running the whole shooting match."

"I fear the operations of the Standard Oil Company are not well understood," replied Mr. Van Kirk, "what I mean is that the Standard Oil Company has not only cheapened

the oil that you consume by reducing the cost of manufacturing it, but it has, by employing its vast capital, developed a hundred or more enterprises depending entirely upon the coal oil output. For instance, anilines for coloring purposes, medicines of great usefulness and of great variety, and an endless number of enterprises have grown up, giving employment to thousands of people and conferring blessings on everybody. Besides this the Company has created a foreign trade that brings millions of dollars into the United States for its enrichment. Wherever coal oil is supposed to exist, there the Company's energies and capital are directed. For example, if you should discover coal oil on your ranch the Company would at once make a contract with you for every barrel you could produce, and pay you a reasonable price for it. In this way the Company is giving employment to tens of thousands of people all over the country. There are perhaps thousands of farmers in the different States who were comparatively poor until they were encouraged to put down coal oil wells on their farms by the Standard Oil Company. So that it may be, I think, honestly and reasonably concluded, that on the whole the Standard Oil Company has been a great blessing to mankind."

"But, isn't it true, Mr. Van Kirk," asked Mr. Grafton, "that the Republican party has favored laws like the high tariff law which has been a fruitful source of trusts?"

"I have thought about this considerably, but I have not been able to satisfy my mind that tariff legislation has anything to do with the creation of trusts," replied Mr. Van Kirk. "The very fact that trusts exist in England where free trade is almost absolute, proves to my mind that tariff legislation has nothing to do with the origin of trusts. There are two things that every one should keep in mind, it seems to me, in considering the subject of trusts: first, that trusts are organized only when times are good; and, second, that since the organization of trusts in the United States, nearly every commodity handled by a trust is cheap-

er now than it was before. I might add that, if Mr. Gompers and other prominent men in the labor union are correct in their views, that trusts increase the demand for labor and maintain a higher and more uniform standard of wages. For this reason most of the labor unions, if not all in the country, are in favor of trusts."

"You present this subject in a way that sets me to thinking," said Mr. Grafton. "I don't know after all of any trust that really hurts the farmer or stock raiser, and hence I don't see why we should look upon them as menacing our interests, or threatening the interests of the country generally. What do you think of imperialism, Mr. Van Kirk?"

"To answer you briefly," said Mr. Van Kirk, "I would say that the hue and cry about imperialism is purely for campaign purposes. There may be a few people who really believe that there are Republicans in power who would foist upon this country what they are pleased to call imperialism. But you know the same cry was raised against Washington, and in a certain sense of the word against President Jackson, and still later against President Grant. If you will take the pains to read the political history of the period covering Washington's time you will find that his enemies charged him with imperialistic tendencies, and even went so far as to declare if he was entrusted with power he would use it to enthrone himself as king and to make vassals of the people. There were many intelligent people who actually believed that he would do this, but now people laugh at the very idea. General Jackson was charged with imperial ideas because he threatened to visit prompt and severe punishment upon certain men in South Carolina for threatening nullification. There were a great many people in this country who warned the people against voting for Grant for President because he was a military man, flushed with victory, and that as sure as he was elected he would proclaim himself an emperor, with imperial powers; that he would use the army, which had obeyed him so many years implicitly, to overthrow the liberties of the people and re-

duce them to a state of vassalage. And there were doubtless a great many people who believed this campaign rot. The fact is that any man or set of men who would propose a policy that looked to their imperial aggrandizement, or to any serious modification of the liberties of the people, would be hurled from power instantly by an indignant nation. Every man and woman in this broad land loves the Republic, loves its Constitution, loves its flag, and it would be practically sure death for any man to propose their overthrow. Imperialism is absolutely impossible in this country. President McKinley fought for the Union, fought for the flag, fought for the rights of not only the white people of this country, the free people of the country, but for all of the people without regard to color or previous condition. He would no more consent to a policy that would impair the liberties of the people or weaken the institutions of the country, than he would consent to a wholesale slaughter of the mothers and the children of the country. Seven-eighths of the Union soldiers and sailors who fought with him for the Union, the stars and stripes and universal equality before the law, voted for him for President in 1896, and will vote for him again in 1900. Will any one have the hardihood to say that this grand army of men who passed through the fires of war for the liberties of the people could be induced to support a man or a proposition favoring imperialism? Impossible! Those who make the charge know it to be false. On the other hand many of the leaders of the movement which has emblazoned upon its banners as a paramount issue of the campaign, 'Anti-Imperialism,' are men who voted and fought for principles of imperialism; men who risked their lives and everything they possessed to erect a confederacy based upon the principles of imperialism; men who shot at President McKinley and the brave men who stood side by side with him battling for universal liberty; men who to-day wear red shirts in North Carolina and with guns and pistols and knives deprive American citizens of their rights under the Constitution

and before the law; men who have put into the State Constitutions of ten States articles which disfranchise American citizens, and condemn them to a condition in which they are governed without their consent. These are the men who are leading the so-called anti-imperialistic movement; who undertake to make the people of this country believe that they are the champions of liberty, of freedom, of equal rights. These are the men who tell you that your liberty is endangered, that your rights are menaced, that the country is on the brink of ruin, that your safety can be assured only by following them. Does it not appear, Mr. Grafton, in the light of these facts, that the cry of imperialism by such men is purely and wholly campaign buncombe?"

"You put it in a pretty strong light," answered Mr. Grafton, "and you may be right. But somehow I can't help thinking that we ought not to force the Filipinos into accepting the authority of the United States against their will."

"What would you do under the circumstances?" said Mr. Van Kirk. "Would you haul down the flag we hoisted over Manila after we destroyed the power of the Spanish nation in Manila Bay, and after the sovereignty of the island was transferred to us by treaty? By the victory of our arms and by treaty we acquired national rights in the Philippine Islands. Nobody can dispute this, and before we had time to consider a rational proposition from citizens of the Island, an army of Filipinos fired on our flag and shot down our soldiers without cause and without provocation. In fact, they did this when we were actually considering how to give them independence, and at the same time protect our interests as a nation, the interests of American citizens resident in the island, and how to maintain law and order there for the protection of citizens and interests of other nations, who, under international law, had a right to demand of us that we give at least as much protection as had been assured them by the Spanish nation. This we are

bound to do by virtue of the obligations imposed on the Government by its success in the war with Spain, by its treaty obligations, by international law, by its duty to its own citizens and by the requirements of civilization. When these obligations are discharged, and the hostile forces in the islands are reduced to a condition to recognize the authority of the United States, it will remain for Congress to determine what shall be done with the Filipinos. If any right minded man can see imperialism in this he must have a very distorted vision."

"But do you think that we need all of these islands?" asked Mr. Grafton.

"My best reply to that question, is, I think, that the growth of the United States has been such within the last twenty-five years that our physical safety as a nation, and the business interests of the country demand that we should have a permanent foothold in the islands we have acquired. Besides we need them for naval and coaling stations, and bases for naval and military operations, and as great depots from which to supply promptly the demands of commerce. To meet the competition of trade in the far East we must have such depots in the Philippine Islands; and the promptness with which we were able to send men and vessels to the relief of Americans and American interests in China, must convince every thoughtful man that we cannot afford to give up the Philippine Islands. Any other view than this, it seems to me, is narrow and short sighted. The older we become and the larger our interests become the more valuable will be Porto Rico, Hawaii and the Philippine Islands to us. I am satisfied that within a few years the entire nation will feel grateful, as we all do now for the Louisiana purchase, for the acquisition of these islands. Intelligent and well meaning men opposed sharply the Louisiana purchase, the purchase of Alaska, yet everyone now applauds the action that made this territory part of the United States. A great many intelligent and patriotic men opposed the accession of the Hawaiian Islands to the

United States. The proposition was rejected by the Democratic party. Yet within a period of three years the people, without respect to party, have come to realize that it was wise and statesmanlike to annex them to the United States. So far as imperialism is concerned in connection with these islands it is simply and utterly out of the question, because whatever permanent policy is adopted by the United States towards these islands must be approved by Congress. The great business concerns of the country are not so much interested in what a few men think of expansion or imperialism, for they know that the politicians use these words as the Chinese soldiers use their gongs in battle, for the purpose of scaring somebody, but the real issue in this campaign is that of 1896—free silver at the ratio of 16 to 1. Mr. Bryan and those who are with him are endeavoring by indirection to win what they failed to do by direction four years ago. Their howl against trusts and imperialism is simply to distract and to deceive. This is what the business men of the country are afraid of, and this is why the men who are really the business pushers of the country will vote solidly against the Kansas City candidate. There was hardly a business man of any prominence in the Kansas City Convention which nominated Mr. Bryan. The convention was dominated by men who have never been in any way identified with an enterprise that has made this nation great. Not a single man in the convention appears in the commercial history of the United States, covering its grand progress during the last twenty-five years. The convention was actually composed of theorists, wild-eyed cranks, ward politicians and keen manipulators like Boss Croker of New York. Just look at the whole situation as you would look at a business proposition, and you will hardly consider it the duty of any honest man to support the Kansas City Platform and ticket. Of course, I do not say this to influence you to change your opinions or your vote, but because you asked me for my views."

"Yes," replied Mr. Grafton, "I did ask you for your

views, and I thank you for giving them to me in such a straightforward way. While you have not spared my party in the least, I feel sure you would not have imposed your views upon me uninvited, and I'm not sure but what you have said some things that will enable me to think more clearly, and perhaps more rationally on the questions that are now being forced to the front in the campaign. I am disposed to think more and more that we ought to have stuck to the free silver issue and let the question of imperialism alone."

CHAPTER XI.

A STARTLING REVELATION TO MR. VAN KIRK.

After dinner Mr. Grafton invited his guest to go with him to the barn and stock sheds to look over the stock. It was the daily custom of Mr. Grafton to inspect his stock, to see that all of their needs had been looked after by the hired help, and to gratify the fondness, characteristic of all stock men, for actually associating with their horses and cattle. Mr. Van Kirk, as has already been intimated, was very fond of finely bred horses and cattle, and he was very glad of the opportunity to accompany Mr. Grafton. He became very much interested in a bunch of Holstein yearlings and lingered over them after Mr. Grafton had left him to visit other stock. Acting upon the suggestion of Mr. Grafton, that he take his own time and visit such sheds or parts of the barn as might strike his fancy, he went from the Holsteins to the barn where there were some very fine young Percherons. While looking at these he overheard loud and animated conversation which came to him through a partition in the barn. He was an unwilling listener at first, but when he heard the name of Virginia spoken he became a willing listener.

"If you don't use your influence to compel Virginia to consent to marry me," he heard spoken in an unfamiliar voice, "I'll put the mortgage on file and sue on the note immediately. I'll take everything covered by the mortgage and will give you no quarter. I have my suspicions about that sleek fellow from New Jersey you have hanging around here, and I don't propose to smother my love for your daughter, and stand by sucking my thumb while he gets in his work. Now, Grafton, I've been a good friend

to you when you needed a friend, and I was a disinterested one, too, and I want you to do the right thing by me. I love your daughter, and will make her a good husband, and I will see that you and Mrs. Grafton never want for anything—if—”

“You get out of here, you coldblooded scoundrel,” exclaimed Mr. Grafton excitedly, “or I’ll run this pitchfork through you.”

“Don’t come at me with that,” was the reply in the unfamiliar voice, “or I’ll puncture your ungrateful skin too quick. I’m fully prepared for you.”

“Yes, you go armed in a peaceful neighborhood, and dare to draw your gun on me, an old man, which shows you are a miserable coward, but you can’t scare me, nor make me yield a single point by your threats. You can take all the property I have, but you can’t make me consent to a dishonorable proposition; so do your best, Moore; but, I’ll have you understand that no Grafton will ever knuckle to a scoundrel and coward like you. Besides, I will tell you that my daughter despises you, and would no more think of marrying you than she would think of marrying a snake.”

“Before I get through with you,” replied the other, “I’ll show you that you can’t tread on this snake with impunity. You’ll repent this before twenty-four hours have rolled over your ungrateful head.”

This seemed to end the conversation and the footsteps of one of the speakers were distinctly heard by Van Kirk retreating towards the door of the barn. Mr. Van Kirk, was, as may well be imagined, very much agitated by what he had overheard. He had been, without any intention on his part, placed in a position to overhear what was not intended for his ears. What in honor should he do? He quickly made up his mind what a frank and honorable man should do, and he immediately sought Mr. Grafton for the purpose of carrying out his intentions. He found him in another part of the barn leaning over a manger

looking in a painfully abstracted way at a horse. He was pale and trembling from head to foot, and when spoken to by Mr. Van Kirk, he looked around in a dazed sort of way.

"Mr. Grafton," said Mr. Van Kirk, "I was forced to hear the conversation you just now had with some man you called Moore. I deem it my duty to tell you that I heard every word that passed between you."

"I am sorry that you heard any part of the conversation, Mr. Van Kirk," replied Mr. Grafton, who was making a heroic effort to regain his composure, "I'm very sorry that anything has happened to mar the pleasure of your visit here. I hope it will not—but—but, I—I feel humiliated, and I know that you will not continue to enjoy your visit with us."

"Do not concern yourself, I pray you," responded Mr. Van Kirk, "about my enjoyment. That is a secondary consideration. It is your happiness and the happiness of your family that is more directly involved. At any rate it seems so to me from what has happened just now, and I am more concerned in that, if you will pardon me for saying so, than in my own enjoyment."

"You speak like a true bred gentleman, sir, and I believe you are one," replied Mr. Grafton, "but do not allow what you have heard pass between me and that scoundrel Moore, to disturb you in any way," and he wiped large drops of perspiration from his face and looked at Mr. Van Kirk as if he would read his innermost thoughts, to reassure himself that he could trust him. His experience with Moore had begun to unsettle his confidence in every man.

"I don't want to be obtrusive, Mr. Grafton," said Mr. Van Kirk, "nor offensive in any way, but I would like to ask you if the Moore who was just now talking with you and using such unmanly, and what appeared to me to be, indecent language, is the same Moore we called on to-day?"

"Yes, it is the same," answered Mr. Grafton.

"I am surprised beyond expression," said Mr. Van Kirk.

"This is not the first time," said Mr. Grafton, "that he has approached me offensively on the subject of marrying my daughter. She rejected his offer of marriage, and then he tried to get me to persuade her to change her mind. I politely but firmly told him that that was impossible; that while she was my daughter, yet it was not within my right to dictate to her whom she should marry. I had hoped that the matter was ended, although he created some alarm and misgivings in my mind by what he said at that time."

"Will you tell me as a friend, Mr. Grafton," said Mr. Van Kirk, "what hold he has on you? I heard him say he would take everything in the way of property you possessed if it was necessary to get even with you." This was said in such a kindly tone of voice that the question was robbed of whatever inquisitiveness there was in it. Mr. Grafton seemed to take this view of the question and answered:

"Yes, I will tell you, that you may know all," replied Mr. Grafton. "I was a candidate for Congress and was anxious, of course, to win. He voluntarily offered to loan me money to meet my campaign expenses and I was foolish enough to borrow from him three thousand dollars. I gave him a mortgage on my personalty as security. At the time he assured me that he would not record the mortgage and as he had no special need of the money, I could take all the time I wished to pay the debt. He encouraged me to believe, as others did, that if I made a vigorous canvass I would be elected, and would then soon have money enough to take up the note. But I was beaten and the debt is hanging over me. I shall sell off my property, even if I have to make sacrifices, and pay this debt. I shall not consider the consequences—this debt must be paid. When my wife and daughter know all they will join me in this determination."

"I can understand, now, Mr. Grafton," observed Mr. Van Kirk, "where your noble daughter gets some of her courage; and I assure you I honor you for the course you have taken in this whole matter."

"I certainly thank you," replied Mr. Grafton, "for these words. They strengthen me in my purpose."

It was with considerable effort the brave man suppressed the emotion which seemed about to unman him.

"This man Moore said you would have to take care of your paper within twenty-four hours," said Mr. Van Kirk, "supposing, of course, it would be impossible for you to do it. I will let you have the money with which to take up this paper, and as much more as you may need, on one condition."

"This is unexpected kindness, sir," exclaimed Mr. Grafton, "but I cannot consider your generous offer. You are a stranger to me and mine comparatively, and you are under no obligations to aid me in the way you propose."

"Yes," eagerly replied Mr. Van Kirk, "I think I have sufficient reason to want to help you, and if you will accept my help, and promise me one thing, you shall soon be out of the clutches of this unscrupulous man."

"Your earnestness and frankness, Mr. Van Kirk," said Mr. Grafton, "almost persuade me to consider your offer. I am so undone that I am hardly fit to decide what to do in the matter. But tell me what I must promise."

"Simply," said Mr. Van Kirk, "that you will not say a word about what I have offered to do, to your wife and daughter."

"It has been the custom of my life," replied Mr. Grafton, "to tell my wife everything about my business affairs, and since Virginia has been old enough she has also shared my confidence. I departed from this rule when I borrowed money from Moore, and I vowed then never to do it again."

"The reason I ask you, my good friend," said Mr. Van Kirk, "not to say anything to your wife and daughter is, that with your consent, I shall ask your daughter to con-

sider an offer of marriage from me; and if she knows of this she will be in no position to entertain such a proposition from me. She will think, and have good reason to do so, that I had a sinister motive in letting you have the money. I disavow any such motive to you, and I think it is due her and me that she shall know nothing about it."

"You are a man of honor, sir," exclaimed Mr. Grafton, "but I hesitate to consent to the arrangement, though generous and disinterested it is."

Mr. Van Kirk was anxious to follow up the advantage he had gained, and lest Mr. Grafton should yet decide against him he quickly said:

"I take it that the matter is closed, Mr. Grafton, and that you will accept my aid. I am anxious and ready to go with you to Mr. Moore to-morrow and release you from every obligation you are under to him."

It was a great struggle for Mr. Grafton. He trembled from head to foot, like one in an ague. He tried to speak, but seemed unable to do so. At last he held out his hand to Mr. Van Kirk as if in despair, and willing to be helped by any friendly hand. He finally gasped in scarcely audible words:

"I will accept your friendship—I will accept your help—and God bless you, as my heart struggles to do, and as my wife and daughter will when they are permitted to know what a generous thing you have done."

After this effort on the part of Mr. Grafton, Mr. Van Kirk had to really support him to keep him from falling. He was ashen pale, and as weak as if he had just risen from a bed of fever. Mr. Van Kirk begged him to be seated and not to give way to his feelings; and then hurriedly brought some cold water from the well and gave him to drink, and bathed his forehead, the veins and arteries of which stood out like whipcords. Presently he recovered sufficiently to walk into the open air, and by the time they reached the house, in a roundabout way, was quite himself.

Virginia had returned from her school, and the greeting

between Mr. Grafton and his daughter showed how strong and sweet was the affection between them.

She held out her hand to Mr. Van Kirk, which he took with more of satisfaction than she divined.

"I am really pleased to find you looking so well after what must have been a very fatiguing ride," said Virginia to Mr. Van Kirk. "Father is such an enthusiast over the beautiful prairie, and the stock to be found on the ranches around us that he is apt to overdo."

"I feel splendidly," replied Mr. Van Kirk, "and think my buoyant and vigorous feelings are largely due to the way I have spent my day. I scarcely recall a day in my life fuller of more genuine pleasure. The never-ending beauty of landscape, the mellow sunshine, and the great variety of fine stock have filled the measure of my enjoyment during the day to overflowing. I have certainly enjoyed it all more than I can easily express."

The rosy cheeks and bright eyes of Virginia were additional evidence of the exhilarating qualities of the prairie air and the splendor of the day. Mr. Van Kirk thought he had never seen a sweeter face nor one of more character. He was really hopelessly in love with her the first day. To be sure he had not far to go, for he had fallen in love with her before he left home.

The evening passed off pleasantly. Virginia read in her usually charming way, and the conversation was full of life and interest. These evening readings had become a part of the home life, and her father particularly seemed to look forward to this part of the evening program with an eager interest. His eyes were somewhat weak, and his daughter found real pleasure in reading to him, besides it was a recreation to her after the routine of her school work.

Noticing a guitar in the corner of the room, Mr. Van Kirk inquired of Virginia if she played, and being answered in the affirmative, he asked her to play. She readily consented, and played and sang very sweetly, although she protested that he must not be too critical as she had been,

for the most part, her own teacher. In truth, she played and sang so well that Mr. Van Kirk, who was a very good musician himself, was well pleased with her performance. He joined in several of her songs with a rich bass voice which blended delightfully with Virginia's contralto, and the Grafton home was given a musical treat that evening which it had never enjoyed before.

Once during the evening Mr. Grafton was somewhat startled by what seemed to him to be a pair of eyes peering through the window under the drawn curtain. He said nothing about it, and dismissed the matter from his mind, thinking that it was undoubtedly the result of the excitement through which he had passed during the day. After retiring, however, those eyes haunted him, and several times he was on the verge of leaving his bed to investigate and, if possible, determine whether any one was prowling about. He finally persuaded himself to believe that it was only a fancy, and he fell asleep.

The Grafton family occupied rooms in the second story, and Mr. Van Kirk, as has been stated, was given the spare bedroom off the parlor. The windows of this room came well down to the floor and opened on a porch running across the entire south end of the house. After retiring to his room, Mr. Van Kirk, upon extinguishing his lamp, sat down near one of the windows and looked out into the starlit sky. He was in a romantic state of mind and enjoyed the quietude of his surroundings. As he looked out of his window at the stars they seemed more beautifully brilliant than they had ever appeared to him before. He compared them to the bright eyes of Virginia, and admitted to himself that the stars lost by the comparison. He realized now more than ever before that his life was bound up with hers—that he loved her, and he trembled at the thought which flashed through his mind that when the test came she might not return his love. His love for her was not without a practical side, for he was eager that the morrow should come when he could perform his promise

to her father, and thereby render a service of substantial value to the daughter. He sat thus for an hour or more in the darkness of his room gazing at the diamonds of the heavens, and listening in a way as if wooing from them some evidence that his love, when he should declare it, would not be turned aside. He was happier than he had ever been in his life. He could account for this only by the thought that he was near her, yes, under the same roof with her. His heart declared that Virginia was the queen who wielded the sceptre of irresistible power over it, and forced him to confess that he was ready to serve her as a willing subject all through life. 'He asked himself, "Why should she not love one so devoted as this?" He half believed that she did; and having argued himself by this sort of heart reasoning to so happy a conclusion, he prepared for bed without lighting the lamp, and was soon wrapped in peaceful and refreshing slumber.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DEBT DISCHARGED.

After breakfast Mr. Grafton and Mr. Van Kirk rode with Virginia to the schoolhouse and then went directly to the Moore ranch, where they found Mr. Moore and his superintendent busily engaged in the office. Mr. Moore received them with his usual politeness, and invited them to the residence.

"No, we have not time to accept of your invitation, this morning," said Mr. Grafton. "I have come over to take up my note in accordance with your demand that it be paid within twenty-four hours."

Mr. Moore looked surprised, and then his face took on an expression that had in it the elements of deadly hatred and revenge. He quickly asserted his mastery over his feelings, however, and replied blandly that he would be glad to attend to the business at once.

He directed his superintendent to get the note and mortgage out of the safe which stood in one corner of the room, near which was the superintendent's desk, and that functionary pretended to obey, but the quick eye of Mr. Van Kirk detected the pretense, and noted the fact that the papers were already on the desk of Mr. Moore. This suggested to Mr. Van Kirk that the papers had been taken out earlier in the morning for the purpose of carrying out the threat Mr. Moore had made in the barn the day before.

The interest was computed and agreed to by the parties, and Mr. Grafton laid down three certified checks of one thousand dollars each which had been endorsed to him by Mr. Van Kirk. He also laid on the table enough currency to cover the amount of the interest.

Mr. Moore looked at the checks, and a scowl, full of

malevolence, flashed over his face, but he quickly resumed his mechanical smile and said:

"I do not know Mr. Van Kirk well enough to accept his checks, notwithstanding they are to all appearances regularly certified. I would prefer cash, Mr. Grafton."

Mr. Grafton looked at Mr. Van Kirk as if he was at a loss for an answer. The latter noticing the embarrassment of Mr. Grafton, quickly replied:

"If the checks are not acceptable to Mr. Moore it will be necessary for us to go to a bank and have them cashed." He then asked Mr. Grafton if they would be able to go to the nearest bank where the business could be attended to and be back to Mr. Moore's ranch by evening.

"It will be necessary to go to the county seat, which will take up most of the day," said Mr. Grafton, "but we can be back by four o'clock, I think."

"Will that be agreeable to you, Mr. Moore?" asked Mr. Van Kirk.

"Yes, I reckon that will do," replied Mr. Moore doggedly.

"Very well, then," answered Mr. Van Kirk, "we shall be here at four o'clock to meet you and conclude the business."

The two gentlemen drove over to the station and took the first train to the county seat, twelve miles away. Mr. Grafton introduced his friend to the bank officials and the checks were cashed without delay. They were compelled to wait some time for a train going in their direction. One came, however, in time to put them down at their station in time for them to drive out to the Moore ranch by four o'clock.

The note and mortgage were taken up by Mr. Grafton, and he and Mr. Van Kirk were soon on their way to the Grafton ranch. The conduct of Mr. Moore when the money was paid over was so brusque that Mr. Van Kirk felt it his duty to treat him with a cold formality bordering closely on disdain. Mr. Grafton left the office without even saying good-bye to Mr. Moore, who looked wickedly

enough at Mr. Van Kirk to suggest that he would be only too well pleased if he could do him bodily injury. On their way home Mr. Van Kirk remarked to Mr. Grafton that he had never seen a more wicked countenance in all his travels.

Mr. Grafton was so full of gratitude to Mr. Van Kirk that he could hardly speak. He undertook to express his gratitude several times, but the effort was too much for him, and his feelings were more eloquently expressed in the tears which rolled down his cheeks. Mr. Van Kirk noticing this said:

"My dear Mr. Grafton, I know what you would say, but it is quite unnecessary that you should say a single word. What I have done is a very small thing for one friend to do for another when he is as well able to do it as I am. I assure you it has given me genuine pleasure; indeed, enough pleasure to liquidate both principal and interest." He said this in a voice so full of frankness and sincerity that it carried conviction with it. Mr. Grafton by great effort replied:

"I am truly grateful, and I want you to know it."

"I do know it, Mr. Grafton," said Mr. Van Kirk, "and that is enough."

They found supper ready for them on their return. Virginia was at the gate to welcome them and greeted her father in her usually affectionate manner, and gave Mr. Van Kirk so cordial a greeting that in his ecstasy a vision passed before him of greetings yet to come. Certain it was he truly appreciated the welcome and showed it very plainly in his happy face and satisfied manner.

The evening was passed in much the same way as the preceding one, only Mr. Van Kirk, at the request of Virginia narrated in his exquisite style experiences he had had in his travels in foreign lands. These narrations were intensely interesting to all of his hearers, but Virginia found in them an interest peculiarly her own. She had never heard a person so interesting and profitably entertaining in her whole life. She was simply charmed with their guest.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE REVENGE OF DISAPPOINTED LOVE.

When the hour came for the family to retire Mr. Van Kirk went to his room and flung himself on the floor by the window where he had communed with the stars the night before. He again looked up into those mysterious brilliants of the universe. They had a greater attraction for him than ever before, and shed a light into his heart that illumined his whole being. His soul was filled with the majesty of the heavens, and he was thrilled with the wonder of the skies, but the glory of it all seemed to him to revolve around the face and soul of Virginia. While thus giving full sway to the poesy of his nature, and indulging to an intoxicating degree, the imagery of his soul, he was suddenly disturbed and brought to earth again by stealthy footsteps which he distinctly heard on the porch outside and near his window. His first impulse was to light his lamp, but on second thought he determined not to do it, and instead arose and noiselessly took a position at one side of the window where he could discern any object dimly outside without being seen himself. His handbag stood on the table near him, containing a revolver and knife, which he had carried with him in his travels, and which he had never been called upon to use but once, when he had doubtless saved his life in defending himself against an attack of brigands in the mountains of Italy. Why he attached any importance to the footsteps he had heard he hardly knew. Somehow the noise had conveyed to him a strange fear. Possibly it was because of the high nervous tension caused by the exciting events of the last 24 hours. The reference of Mr. Moore to himself in the conversation overheard in the barn had made a deep impression on him,

not of fear of the man so much as a kind of conviction that he would do him harm if he had an opportunity, not openly, but by some underhanded means. He had come to feel that he must be on his guard against this man. As soon as he heard the footsteps the sense of fear which came over him was at once associated with the man from whose unscrupulous power he had delivered Mr. Grafton. In the shadow of the house and of two large spruce pines which stood near the edge of the porch, it was difficult to distinctly discern any object on the porch. He waited for a few seconds almost breathlessly, when he saw dimly the outlines of two men standing close under one of the trees referred to. One of them slunk back and half buried himself in the dense branches of the tree, while the other in a half stooped posture, with a cat-like tread, approached the window. Mr. Van Kirk could not make out the features, but he was satisfied that the approaching figure bore a marked resemblance to Mr. Moore. The man examined the window closely and then withdrew to the figure concealed in the tree. The two men appeared to be holding a consultation.

Mr. Van Kirk had almost made up his mind to call Mr. Grafton down stairs that they might go out together and ascertain, if possible, the object of the intruders. On more mature thought, however, he concluded not to disturb the family and to await further developments. He thought it more than possible that the resemblance he saw between one of the men and Mr. Moore was due to imagination, and that it was more than likely the men were tramps hunting a place to lodge for the night. The state of the weather, however, tended to preclude this idea, and he determined to remain dressed and to keep himself in readiness for anything that might happen. He sat down on a chair near the window and waited. He had not long to wait when he heard the footsteps again approaching the window. As nearly as he could make out it was the same man who first approached and examined the window. The only difference observable was that the man did not assume the

crouching posture of the first one. He seemed more bold in his movements, and acted like one who had assured himself that the coast was clear. Presently, Mr. Van Kirk distinctly heard a scratch on the window pane very much like that made by the diamond of a glazier. Mr. Van Kirk soon discovered that the man was really cutting the window glass with a diamond. As the work progressed Mr. Van Kirk became satisfied that the man intended to effect an entrance into the room by cutting a hole in the glass so as to enable him to push back the sash lock. The scratching ceased and the man placed against the glass a round black object which he pressed against the pane firmly with his hand for some seconds. Then followed a sharp, quick tap and a current of cold air rushed into the room through what was evidently a hole in the glass made by the clever work of the would-be burglar.

By this time the purpose of the men was so well defined that Mr. Van Kirk realized that he must act. His fear had deserted him, and he was thinking and feeling as deliberately as if no danger threatened him. His first thought was to shoot down the burglar through the window. This course, however, would arouse the family and give unnecessary alarm to Mrs. Grafton and her daughter. This quickly determined him not to use his revolver, and he took out of his bag the heavy knife already alluded to. The man had inserted a part of his hand through the hole in the window and was endeavoring to move to one side the lock. For some reason the lock was not easily displaced, yet the man persevered as if he felt confident that the lock would yield to his manipulation in time. Mr. Van Kirk took a favorable position, and raised his knife above the burglar's hand and quickly brought its sharp edge down upon the inserted fingers, and then sprang back to one side away from the window. The burglar gave a distinct exclamation of pain, and with one bound joined his companion against the trees. Two quick flashes of light were almost instantaneously followed by two distinct pistol reports. The bullets crashed

through the window and were distinctly heard to embed themselves in the wall of the room. Two other shots followed quickly, and the rapidly receding footsteps of the two men were heard by Mr. Van Kirk, who threw up the window and sprang out on the porch and followed in the direction of the fleeing men. He had reached the end of the porch when two more shots were fired from the roadway. Before the flash of the revolvers had disappeared, Mr. Van Kirk had discharged his revolver several times hoping to get at least one of the men who was exposed by the flash of his pistol. Other shots were exchanged when the burglars rode hurriedly away on horseback. After the first shot fired by Mr. Van Kirk he threw himself flat on the ground to be less exposed to the return fire. The battle being over for the time being, Mr. Van Kirk returned to his room where he found Mr. Grafton and the ladies in a high state of excitement. Virginia, however, was the calmest of the three, and at once began to question Mr. Van Kirk as to what had happened. He hurriedly explained what had taken place, and treated the matter so calmly and so lightly that it greatly relieved the situation of its tragical effects. Suddenly, however, Virginia noticed two severed fingers lying on the floor. Her attention was drawn to them by the reflection of a diamond ring on one of the fingers. Upon holding the light nearer to the ghastly scene she gave a startled cry and said:

“I cannot be mistaken. It is surely his ring.”

She was so much overcome that she looked like one in a faint. Mr. Van Kirk quickly caught her in his arms and asked Mr. Grafton to hand him some water. Before the water was brought, however, Virginia had recovered herself and begged them to not be concerned on her account. Mrs. Grafton was so greatly alarmed that it was with much difficulty that she was quieted. Virginia noticed blood trickling down one of Mr. Van Kirk's hands and she exclaimed:

“Why, Mr. Van Kirk, you are wounded,” and she point-

ed to his hand which was covered with blood. He looked at his hand and remarked that it could not be much of a wound for he had not felt any pain on account of it. Virginia fetched some water and a towel while Mr. Van Kirk removed his coat, and it was discovered that he had received a flesh wound between the elbow and the shoulder. Virginia washed the arm and wound while Mrs. Grafton brought an antiseptic from the medicine cabinet. Virginia insisted on doing the rôle of surgeon, and as a result of her skill and deftness the wound was soon dressed in a manner that would have done credit to a more experienced nurse.

There was no more sleep in the Grafton house that night. Mr. Van Kirk urged the ladies to retire and get some sleep, assuring them that the danger was over, and that he and Mr. Grafton, in order to give them greater assurance, would stand guard till daylight. But Mrs. Grafton and Virginia insisted that it was their duty to remain up and share with Mr. Van Kirk and Mr. Grafton whatever of danger might come during the rest of the night.

After the household had become somewhat quieted, Mr. Van Kirk said:

"Miss Grafton, when you saw the severed fingers of the would-be burglar you made a remark respecting the ring on one of the fingers which was somewhat suggestive."

"Yes, I remarked, I believe, that I could not be mistaken, it must be his, or something like that," answered Virginia. "I simply meant that the diamond ring on one of the fingers lying on the floor, which had been severed by your dextrous use of the knife, was a ring that Mr. Moore had been wearing ever since I have known him. I am sure that it is his ring."

"Do you mean, daughter, that it is Mr. Moore's ring?" exclaimed Mrs. Grafton. "How can it be?"

"Yes," replied Virginia, "I recognized the ring instantly."

"Well," said Mrs. Grafton, with a puzzled expression on her face, "the burglars must have been at Mr. Moore's house and succeeded in getting in and robbing him, else how could the burglar have had Mr. Moore's ring?"

It had not dawned on Mrs. Grafton's mind that Mr. Moore himself was the would-be burglar. In her excitement she suggested that some one ought to go immediately to Mr. Moore's ranch in order to find out if a murder had been committed as well as a burglary.

"It would be better, I fancy, for Mr. Moore if his house had been burglarized and the fingers lying in there on the carpet had been chopped from the hand of some one other than Mr. Moore himself," replied Virginia.

Mrs. Grafton arose from her chair and staring in a bewildered way at her daughter, exclaimed:

"You do not mean to insinuate, surely, that Mr. Moore tried to break into our house?"

Mr. Grafton went across the room to his wife and explained to her that possibly there might be some mistake about it, but that both Mr. Van Kirk and himself were seriously of the opinion that Mr. Moore was the would-be burglar. Mrs. Grafton sank back in her chair exclaiming: "How can it be? How can it be?"

When daylight came a careful inspection was made of the porch and the grounds between the porch and the road where the would-be burglars stood when they fired the last shots. The porch in front of the window was covered with blood stains, and blood spots were found on the ground near the edge of the porch, and there was a trail of blood from the porch to the fence, and on the fence, showing where the burglars had climbed over in their flight. On the ground just over the edge of the porch was found the piece of glass which had been cut from the window. The neatness and precision with which it had been removed showed that the hand which did the work was a steady one, and not without skill in that kind of business. Against one side of the piece of glass was a round piece of tough

substance, harder than leather, and about two-thirds of the size of the piece of glass. It was so firmly glued to the glass that it was almost a part of it. From the center of the adhering patch was a projecting piece of leather large enough and long enough to enable the fingers to clutch it firmly. This patch was pressed against the window pane until it adhered and the incision around it having been made all that was necessary was a quick rap with some kind of instrument to complete the job, and the piece of detached glass was jerked outward with the other hand. A close examination of the window frame and the wall of the room opposite the window showed that four bullets had been fired before the men retreated. One of the bullets plowed through the window frame very near to where Mr. Van Kirk was standing. The other three bullets entered the window near the center and too high up to have struck him if he had been actually standing in front of the window. One of the bullets fired by the burglars from the road struck the corner post of the porch at about the height of Mr. Van Kirk's breast. Another bullet struck the corner of the house at about the same distance from the floor of the porch. The other bullets went wild. It was thought that the bullet which struck the post was the one which inflicted the wound in Mr. Van Kirk's arm. An examination of the fence showed bullet marks from Mr. Van Kirk's revolver at about the right height to show that he had taken very accurate aim at the flashes of the burglars' revolvers. It was quite evident that his fire was so accurate and rapid that the burglars mounted their horses and retreated hurriedly to escape the fire.

Both Mr. Grafton and Mr. Van Kirk expected to find the tracks of the horses leading in the direction of Mr. Moore's ranch, and were greatly surprised, and somewhat nonplussed, to find that they led in exactly the opposite direction. Mr. Grafton suggested, however, that it was a blind—that they took the opposite direction in order to mislead. He was firmly convinced that the guilty man

was none other than Mr. Moore, accompanied by some one of his desperate cowboys. Mr. Van Kirk agreed with him in this conviction, and they determined to act upon this theory in working up the case.

After a hurried breakfast Mr. Grafton started for the county seat for the purpose of laying the matter before the sheriff of the county. Mr. Van Kirk remained at the ranch as company for the ladies, and as a sort of guard of the premises. Mrs. Grafton continued to labor under great excitement, and it required all of the quieting influence of Virginia to keep her from becoming hysterical. Virginia showed calmness and courage in perfect keeping with the qualities which had shown themselves in her conduct the night of the blizzard.

Mr. Grafton had not travelled more than half the distance to the railroad station when he met Mr. Spellbinder in company with the sheriff and two other men who were introduced to him as detectives from the State of Texas. Mr. Spellbinder explained that the detectives were armed with an extradition warrant for the arrest of Osmond Blackburn alias Thomas Moore, indicted for burglary and manslaughter.

Mr. Grafton gave the sheriff the details of the attempted burglary of his house, and the narrow escape of his guest, Mr. Van Kirk; and stated with great positiveness that it was his belief that Moore was the guilty man.

A hurried consultation between the sheriff and detectives and Mr. Spellbinder, evolved the plan that they would return to the station and that Mr. Grafton should go back to his home and endeavor to watch the movements on the Moore ranch. This plan was carried out.

When the sheriff and Mr. Spellbinder arrived at the railroad station they immediately communicated by telegraph with the warden of the penitentiary, requesting him to send a couple of bloodhounds, with their keeper, by the first train. They arrived the next day; and by noon the sheriff and his party were at the Grafton ranch.

In the evening the detectives mounted on good horses rode out to a point near the ranch and took positions from which they could plainly see everything occurring about Mr. Moore's buildings. In this way the ranch was watched from two sides so vigilantly that had anybody attempted to leave it he must have been seen, but nothing unusual was observed during the night. In fact, it seemed to Mr. Grafton that there was less activity on the ranch than usual. Lights were seen in the house and office, but nothing of a suspicious nature was detected by either Mr. Grafton or the detectives.

The detectives looked over the work at the window carefully and pronounced it that of a professional. They also inspected the amputated fingers and the ring. They agreed that the ring was the one used in cutting the glass, and that the fingers belonged on the left hand. This latter fact they declared pointed towards Moore, because, as they asserted, he was left-handed, and it was for this reason the burglar used his left hand in manipulating the sash lock.

They showered compliments upon Mr. Van Kirk for his calmness and courage, but expressed regret that he did not shoot dead the would-be burglar at short range while he was trying to unfasten the lock. One of them remarked that the only rule to follow in dealing with burglars was to shoot them down without warning if possible.

The hounds were taken to the spot where the burglars stood near the tree from which led the trail of blood to the fence. The dogs sniffed the ground a few seconds and then started with a deep bay on the trail. Climbing over the fence, they circled round once or twice in the road where the burglars had made confused tracks in mounting their horses, and without hesitation they started on the trail down the road. On they went for two miles, when they veered to the west and went out on the prairie. Without slacking their speed and without deviating in the least in their general course, they followed the trail to a point almost due north of the buildings on Moore's ranch. Here

they turned east and kept that course until they reached the windmill which pumped water for Mr. Moore's stock. The dogs hesitated here and made several circles around the windmill. The posse following the dogs caught up with them here, and discovered blood marks on the side of one of the watering troughs, near which they found a handkerchief saturated with blood partly hidden under a board. The dogs soon struck the trail again and bounded off in the direction of the ranch house. About half a mile from the windmill the dogs separated, one going on direct towards the house, and the other towards the bottom of the Loup River where Mr. Moore maintained what he called the "Bottom Ranch." The man in charge of the dogs promptly interpreted this movement to mean that the two burglars had separated at this point for some reason or other.

"If the dogs," he said, "don't abandon one trail or the other to travel in company we'll run them both to cover."

Presently the dog which had turned towards the river whirled in his tracks and came back to the point from which he had made his detour and followed, with increased speed, the trail held by the other dog.

The keeper got off his horse and stuck a stake with a handkerchief tied to it at the point of divergence, and then galloped on after the dogs. Within a few minutes both dogs were at the door of the ranch barn baying like mad. When the posse caught up the dogs were rearing up against the door of the barn and fiercely gnawing the boards as if to force an entrance. The keeper was of the opinion that one of the burglars had put his horse in the stable and afterwards had gone to the house. Acting upon this theory, he caused the hounds to circle around the barn a little distance from it for the purpose of determining whether his theory was correct. Sure enough the dogs struck the trail leading to the house, and immediately followed it. When they reached the house, they attacked the rear door as fiercely as they had the barn door. This satisfied the keep-

er that one of the men they were after had entered the house. To prove this, he started the dogs in a circle around the house and when they came to the trail from the barn to the house, they again took it and attacked the door of the house as in the first instance. One of the detectives went to the front door, while the other one remained at the back door with the sheriff. The dogs were leashed by the keeper in order that he might have them under control should the burglar be found. After repeated knocking at both doors, the rear one was opened by a man wearing a white cap and white apron such as are commonly worn by cooks. He asked what was wanted.

"We desire to see Mr. Moore," said one of the detectives.

"He is not at home," answered the man without betraying any excitement. "He started to Chicago the day before yesterday, and will not be back for several weeks. I am expecting the superintendent from the railroad station every minute. Perhaps he will do, as he attends to all of Mr. Moore's ranch business."

The frankness and straightforwardness of the man was somewhat puzzling to the officers; and they determined to wait awhile for the return of the superintendent. They had not waited long till he drove up in a runabout, and seemed surprised to find such a party at the house awaiting him. He turned his horse over to a stableman, and after being introduced to the gentlemen of the party, he very politely and cordially invited them into the house. At this moment the keeper with his dogs came around the corner of the house, and almost instantly both dogs gave a startling bay and leaped with such violence toward the superintendent that the keeper was jerked to the ground and dragged some distance before he succeeded in stopping them. They seemed determined to get at the superintendent, and it required the keeper and sheriff both to restrain them. Noticing the danger he was in, the superintendent turned as pale as death, urging the party the while to enter the house out of the way of such vicious animals. The keeper whis-

pered to one of the detectives that without doubt this was one of the men they had trailed from the Grafton ranch. Acting upon this suggestion the detectives at once arrested the superintendent and put handcuffs on him. He expressed great indignation at such treatment, and demanded to know the cause of it.

He was told that a crime had been committed in the neighborhood, and that the bloodhounds had tracked at least one of the criminals to the Moore ranch.

"The hounds," continued the detective, "have spotted you as one of the men we are after, and under the authority of the law we take you in charge."

The superintendent denied all knowledge of any crime, and pleaded his innocence with such earnestness that all of the party except the detectives and the keeper of the hounds were led to doubt his guilt.

Mr. Grafton had remarked upon the absence of the usual number of hired men about the ranch, and he suggested to the sheriff that he ask the superintendent where the men were.

"Where is Mr. Moore?" inquired the sheriff of the superintendent.

"Mr. Moore," he replied, "left for Chicago a few days ago, to be gone some time."

"Where are the men usually seen about the ranch?" asked the sheriff.

"Most of them are at the Bottom Ranch," he replied.

This was said without hesitation and with such candor that it rather staggered the sheriff and those who heard it.

The keeper of the dogs was not satisfied with what they had accomplished. He said that he had no doubt whatever that the other man they wanted had gone to the Bottom Ranch, and he proposed going back to where he had stuck the stake in the ground on which he tied his handkerchief and putting the dogs on that trail. Two men were left in charge of the superintendent, and the rest of the party started for the other trail. When they arrived at the stake

the dogs took the side trail which they followed without a wobble until they came to a small creek called the Never-sink which flowed into the Loup a mile below. Here they wavered, and ran up and down the creek for some little distance. Finally they plunged into the water, swam across, and in a short time struck the trail on the opposite side. They followed this trail in a direct line towards a log cabin with a large stockade corral near it, located about a quarter of a mile from the north bank of the Loup River. When they had reached the corral, they attacked the door with the same fierceness they had the door of the ranch residence. By the time the posse following arrived at the stockade, several men in cowboy attire, with the usual arsenal strapped to their hips, had come out of the cabin and were eying the dogs suspiciously.

"Good mornin'," they said to the sheriff who was leading the posse.

"Good morning," answered the sheriff.

"What the devil do them hounds want yelpin' and bitin' around here like that?" asked one of the men who looked as if he might be the boss.

"We are trailing the perpetrators of a crime that has been committed in the neighborhood," replied the sheriff.

"Well, there ain't no criminals about this ranch, and you'd better call them d— brutes off mighty quick or we'll feed 'em some cold lead," said the man with a good deal of braggadocio.

"You had better not undertake to do that, my man," replied the sheriff. "Those dogs belong to the State and they are here under the protection and by the authority of the State."

"We don't give a d— for that," replied the man defiantly. "Dogs is dogs, and if you don't call 'em off we'll plug 'em sure."

"The dogs will not hurt you. They are perfectly harmless to every one except the criminal they are trailing, and if he isn't here the dogs will do no harm to anybody on the

ranch. Open the gate and let us in, and if the criminal is not in there, we shall withdraw and take the dogs with us."

"I don't know as we have to open the gate; it's Mr. Moore's and we're here to take care of it, and if you hain't got an order from him I reckon the gate will not be opened right away to accommodate you," replied the man in an insolent, dogged way.

"We shall see about that," replied the sheriff. "I have an extradition warrant for the arrest of Mr. Moore, as you call him, and the State hounds have located him at this ranch, and in the name of the law I insist on your opening the gate that we may execute the warrant."

The sheriff produced the warrant and read it to the man, and endeavored to satisfy him that he must not obstruct the officers in the discharge of their duty. The sheriff asked in a polite way if Mr. Moore was in the stockade or had been within a few hours.

"I don't know as it is everybody's business whether he is or is not," answered the man in a swaggering way, "but as you're an officer of the law I'll kinder condescend to say that Mr. Moore aint here; I reckon he is in Chicago, as he started for there several days ago."

"You said a while ago," observed the sheriff, "that we would have to get an order from Mr. Moore before we could enter the stockade. Now you say he is in Chicago. How do you expect us to get an order from him under these circumstances?"

"An order from the superintendent will do," answered the man bluntly.

"The superintendent is under arrest and in irons. You must open that gate at once," demanded the officer.

At this juncture the gate opened far enough for five men to squeeze out. The dogs seeing the opening made a lunge forward as if to enter. At this several of the cowboys drew their revolvers in a threatening way, and it looked as if the crisis had come.

"These dogs will not hurt you," said the sheriff, "and

the man who dares to shoot will do so at his peril."

"Put up your guns, boys, maybe you'll have better use for 'em," said the boss.

The guns were put up with ill-concealed reluctance, and the men stood as if ready for "gun play" at any moment—indeed, as if they were eager for it to begin. The sheriff recognized one of the men who squeezed out of the corral as probably the worst character who had ever come up the trail from Texas to Ogalalla. He had the reputation of being a dead shot and had "killed his man," and never met his Waterloo until he ran up against Captain Smith, who distinguished himself in the capture of "Gold-tooth" Middleton.

Knowing this man's reputation, and the evident purpose of the outfit to resist the execution of the warrant, he made up his mind that it would be rash for him with his present posse to undertake to force the gate. Going aside he called the two detectives, Mr. Grafton and Mr. Spellbinder to him to hold a consultation.

"There is trouble in sight, gentlemen," said the sheriff, "and our posse is not large enough to tackle the job. There are eight of Moore's men in sight and how many more there may be out of sight in the stockade and cabin can only be guessed at. I know that Moore has as many as twenty-five men in his employ, and there were not more than three or four at the residence this morning. The superintendent said that the others were at this ranch, consequently there must be not less than twenty men that we'll have to deal with if we undertake to force the gate. So, what shall be done?"

"It will be necessary for us to withdraw from here and collect a larger force, if it can be done," suggested Mr. Spellbinder.

"There are but two things to do," replied the sheriff, "either to abandon the job or get a big enough force to carry it out. I don't propose to adopt the former course, I assure you."

After some consultation, it was agreed that the posse should withdraw to the higher ground overlooking the stockade, where some of the men would be left to perform picket duty while the sheriff, Mr. Grafton and Mr. Spellbinder went to gather a larger force. Before they started, however, the sheriff returned to the boss of the outfit, and again demanded, in the name of the law, that the door of the stockade be thrown open.

"I'll see yer and the scabby lot yer got with yer in h—first," was his insolent reply.

"Then we'll have to take the necessary steps to maintain the dignity of the law and the sovereignty of the State," said the sheriff.

"Do yer darndest," replied the boss, "we'll be with yer when the play begins. We've got a little sovereignty of our own to take care of, and that's what this stockade is fer."

The other cowboys stood as if waiting for a word or motion to begin the "gun play," and all seemed surprised, if not disappointed, when the sheriff's posse rode off leading the dogs.

Within three hours thirty determined men assembled at the Grafton ranch, armed with Winchester rifles and revolvers. The evidences of the attempt to break into the house and to murder Mr. Van Kirk, fired them with determination and an eager desire to capture the would-be murderers. Refreshments were served, and several baskets of provisions were put up for the men to eat later on. When the posse was about ready to start, Mr. Van Kirk indicated his purpose to go along, notwithstanding his wounded arm had swollen considerably, and had developed some inflammation. Some of the gentlemen told him it was quite unnecessary for him to go, and Mrs. Grafton and Virginia protested, declaring that it was really a species of recklessness on his part. All of the protestations were unavailing, for he said he was determined to go. He made the necessary preparations and was in readiness when the posse was ready to move. He persuaded Mr. Grafton, who

was very much fatigued on account of loss of sleep and the exertions he had gone through during the day, to remain with his wife and daughter.

About this time Mr. Spellbinder came up and indicated his purpose to stay at the ranch, saying that he was nearly worn out, besides he said:

"I have been extremely anxious all day lest something might have happened to the ladies here who have no protection except Mr. Van Kirk, who was wounded, and I consider it the duty of some able-bodied man to stay here and act as a guard."

"That is quite unnecessary, Mr. Spellbinder," said Virginia. "We are in no danger even if left alone, but father will remain and allow Mr. Van Kirk to use his riding horse and Winchester. Besides, I know something about the use of a gun myself."

"I am about used up," answered Mr. Spellbinder, "and I feel as if I am about fit for a 'home-guard.' I think the number of men we have got together, who are used to the saddle and outdoor hardships, will be able to capture the stockade without me."

"Of course Mr. Spellbinder, we shall be glad to have you stay," said Virginia, "but somehow I feel that you will be more needed at the stockade."

"I think I'll stay," rejoined Mr. Spellbinder. "In my used-up condition I don't think I'll be of much use to the sheriff. I'm not used to this sort of thing, you know. It's not in my line. Now, if it was a campaign against the Republicans, I could go it from now until election day and speak every day and night without feeling it," and he cast a wistful eye towards the dining-room.

Virginia noticed his glance in the direction of the edibles, and divining its meaning, she said:

"You are doubtless hungry, Mr. Spellbinder, and if you will go with me to the dining-room I will help you to something to eat."

"That I will, Miss Grafton, for I am as hungry as a

wolf," he replied. "I am truly grateful to you for the suggestion."

Virginia helped him to a bountiful supply of victuals, including a hot cup of coffee, to which he addressed himself with promptness and vigor.

Virginia excused herself, saying that she desired to see the men and bid them Godspeed before they left. She was just in time to do this, for the column was moving when she arrived at the gate leading into the roadway where her father and mother were standing. Mr. Van Kirk lingered for a few seconds at the gate talking with Mr. Grafton and the two ladies, and before he went shook hands with each. Virginia wished him Godspeed and success, and followed him apparently with eager eyes until he had rejoined the column and the posse was out of sight.

"He's a brave fellow," said Mr. Grafton.

"I think so myself," answered Virginia. "I like a man of his mettle. A wound to him seems nothing at all, and he courts opportunity to do what appears to him to be his duty. He proved his courage last night."

"You have left Mr. Spellbinder alone, Virginia," observed Mrs. Grafton.

"Yes, I think, however, he will be able to take care of himself at the table," Virginia replied rather sarcastically.

Mrs. Grafton hurried into the dining-room and found Mr. Spellbinder apparently satisfied with himself and all the world. She made some apology for his having been left alone.

"Oh, I'm getting on first rate," he answered with his mouth full of victuals.

"What a terrible experience this is, father," said Virginia, "I do hope there will be no further bloodshed. Wouldn't it be dreadful if Mr. Van Kirk should be killed or seriously wounded?"

"I trust no one will be hurt," replied her father. "There has been tragedy enough already. But I share with you your solicitude for our guest, Mr. Van Kirk. I've truly learned to admire him for his genuine manly qualities."

Virginia looked at her father intently for a moment, and then said:

"So do I father, so do I."

"I am glad of that, Virginia, for I happen to know that he would give a great deal to hear you speak the words you have just uttered," he answered.

"Why, what can you mean, father?" exclaimed Virginia.

"Just this, daughter," answered Mr. Grafton, "he has declared to me that it was his purpose, with my consent, at a fitting time to ask you to become his wife."

"What did you say to him, father?" asked Virginia.

"I scarcely recall what I did say," he answered, "but I think I said enough to him to indicate that I had no objections."

"Why have you said nothing to me about it before, father?" she asked evincing more interest than her father was prepared to see.

"Why, my dear daughter, how could I have said anything to you about it?" he replied, "with all the tragical happenings of the last day or so. It was only the day before yesterday he said this to me."

"True, my dear father, you have had no opportunity," she replied, "I spoke thoughtlessly. I am extremely glad, however, that you have told me this."

"I am glad also," replied her father, "and I hope that you will treat him with the utmost consideration."

"I certainly have every reason to do so," she replied, coloring a little.

Mr. Spellbinder had finished his meal, and had come out where Mr. Grafton and his daughter were seated on the porch. Mr. Spellbinder remarked that he felt more like himself now since he had regaled the inner man with some of Mrs. Grafton's well-cooked victuals.

"I'm certainly glad to know that you feel better," answered Virginia.

"Yes," said Mr. Spellbinder, "I got pretty hungry chasing after those hounds, and I'm not used to horseback

riding. I'll feel pretty stiff in the morning, I apprehend. I hope we'll succeed in catching the scoundrels, especially that arch-scoundrel, Moore."

"Do you really think he had anything to do with the attempted burglary?" asked Virginia.

"Do I?" he exclaimed, "I am satisfied he is at the bottom of it all, if not the principal actor," and he looked at Virginia as if he would read her innermost thoughts.

Mr. Spellbinder felt pretty well satisfied that Virginia had more than a passing interest in the man, Moore, and he attributed her apparent confidence in his innocence to that fact. He availed himself of this opportunity to exploit what he knew about Moore. He also took occasion to say to Mr. Grafton and his daughter that he had worked up the case against Moore which had brought the detectives and himself into the neighborhood just in the nick of time. He explained to them that the Governor of Texas had made a requisition for Moore's return to that State where an indictment was hanging over his head for a heinous crime committed ten years ago.

"Is it possible," exclaimed Virginia, "that what you say can be true? One can hardly conceive of such hypocrisy."

Mr. Spellbinder put his part of the matter in the strongest light possible, and a complacent smile spread over his countenance indicating that he felt satisfied with his effort.

"I can hardly realize," said Mr. Grafton, "that it is possible that we have been harboring such a man under our roof," and he excused himself to go to the barn to look after his stock.

"I hope you will pardon me, Miss Grafton," said Mr. Spellbinder, "but I desire to say that the interest I have taken in bringing Mr. Moore to justice, aside from my general desire to see criminals punished, was because of my love for you. I know you rejected my offer of marriage, but despite of that I love you still."

Virginia turned towards him as if startled, and looked

him in the face as one who could not believe her ears. "Because of your love for me?" she exclaimed.

"Yes, Miss Grafton, because of my love for you," answered Mr. Spellbinder, and he made a move as if to get nearer to her.

Virginia stayed him with a motion of her hand and said:

"I am surprised, Mr. Spellbinder, both at what you have said and the time you have chosen for saying it. You will agree that this is hardly a proper time to broach such a subject. A terrible tragedy may be enacting at this very moment within a few miles of us in which some of our friends may be sacrificing their lives in an effort to uphold the authority of the law. You will pardon me if I absolutely decline to discuss the subject."

"I beg your pardon, Miss Grafton," he replied. "Perhaps the time is inopportune, but my heart was so full of the subject that I couldn't restrain myself."

"I will say this much, Mr. Spellbinder, on the subject," she replied, "I do not consider myself free to listen to your declarations of love, and I shall be obliged to you if you will not refer to the subject again."

"Can it be, as I have suspected," he exclaimed, "that you are engaged to marry that scoundrel, Moore? I will see that that will soon come to an end," and his whole frame shook with excitement and anger.

"I do not admit your right, Mr. Spellbinder, to catechise me in this way," she replied, "but I deem it proper and due to myself, under the circumstances, to inform you that I am not engaged to Mr. Moore, and that I never have been."

Mr. Spellbinder excused himself and walked down towards the gate. Virginia remained seated, with her eyes anxiously looking in the direction of the stockade, where it was possible that at that very moment a desperate conflict was going on. The thought made her tremble. She offered a silent prayer for all on the side of law and justice, and almost involuntarily her most fervent prayer was for the safety of Mr. Van Kirk.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE COWBOYS DEFIANT TO THE LAST.

The re-enforced posse proceeded to the stockade, and was met by the same men who had come outside in the morning. The sheriff in a polite but firm way demanded that the gate be opened for the execution of the law.

"I was ordered by Mr. Moore," said the boss of the outfit, "to take care of his property and I'll do it if it costs me my life."

"We are not here," replied the sheriff, "to interfere in any manner with the property of the man you call Moore. What the State wants and what it insists upon having is access to this stockade and cabin for the purpose of arresting a man under indictment for crime, and who is suspected of having attempted a burglary the night before last. We believe you are harboring and defending this criminal, and in doing so you are resisting an officer in the discharge of his duty. You are doing this at your peril, and I advise you to desist at once."

"I suppose," replied the boss doggedly, "that we've got the whole State to fight, and maybe it's a bigger job than a few fellers ought to tackle, but if you think we're afeered to try it you're clean off, mister. We can clean out this outfit you've got here and do it dead easy."

"You had better get your men together," said the sheriff in a kindly tone, "and talk the situation over calmly. It may be that you will come to the conclusion that it will be better for you to open the gate than to take the chances of armed resistance. We'll give you a reasonable time to talk it over, and I hope you will come to the conclusion not to defy the authority of the State any longer."

The boss turned to his men and beckoned them aside a

little way where they engaged in a consultation which lasted several minutes. At the conclusion the boss advanced to the sheriff and said:

"Mister, I guess we'll fight, and you'd better git back before the 'gun play' begins."

"That is your answer, is it?" asked the sheriff.

"Sure; and the boys will stand by me you bet," he replied.

The sheriff was not wholly disappointed in this answer, yet he had hoped that the better sense of the men would prevail. It hardly need be said that the sheriff was troubled somewhat to know what was the best course to pursue. After a consultation with the detectives and other members of the posse, he gave directions for his men to fall back to the brow of the hill commanding the stockade. He had fully made up his mind to bring the rebellious outfit to terms, and he hoped to accomplish it without losing a man. Reaching the brow of the hill he posted his men at points fully covering the stockade. When he had done this he gave orders that they form themselves into reliefs so that picket duty could be performed in the most satisfactory way.

Several men were sent for blankets and provisions, and the sheriff started to the nearest telegraph office on a fleet horse to order two field pieces and ammunition, from the county seat. This he accomplished and was back on the field with ten additional men by ten o'clock. Nothing of importance had occurred during his absence, and he found the men well posted and the reliefs all arranged for the night.

"It seems to me, sheriff," said Mr. Van Kirk, "that men ought to be posted between the stockade and the river to intercept any one trying to escape in that direction."

"I agree with you," replied the sheriff, "but it's a dangerous undertaking. I don't want to lose a single life if I can help it."

"I will volunteer," said Mr. Van Kirk, "to take up such a position, if you will permit it."

This was agreed to, and the two men walked up to the picket post nearest the river where five men were stationed, and from here reconnoitered the situation.

"I have a plan," said Mr. Van Kirk. "I will follow the ridge and when far enough above the stockade to be well concealed I will crawl down to the river bank, and under cover of that take up a position under the bank as near as possible to the stockade."

"I'm a little shaky about this proposition of yours, Mr. Van Kirk," said the sheriff. "It's a good move, but I'm a little afraid that the keen eyes of those cowboys will detect your movement and send a bullet into you. I think we can compel the surrender of the stockade without having a man wounded or killed. You've been wounded once within the last forty-eight hours, and I should consider myself culpable if I were to consent to allow you to unnecessarily expose yourself and be shot the second time, perhaps more seriously."

"I have volunteered, sheriff," replied Mr. Van Kirk, "and I absolve you from all responsibility in the undertaking. It seems to me that the point between the house and the river ought to be guarded by all means."

"Well, I waive my judgment in the matter," said the sheriff, "and will allow you to take your own course. But you must exercise extreme caution in your movements."

"There is a sand-draw about half a mile above here," remarked one of the men. "I know this country pretty well, and I'll guide the gentleman if he would like to have me, and stay with him if the sheriff says so."

"That is a good idea," said the sheriff, "I think it will be better for two to go rather than one."

The two men took their blankets and some "grub" and started on their perilous undertaking. Half a mile above they found the sand-draw which led down to the river bank. It was easy enough for them to follow this down without

being seen from the stockade, and it was practicable for them to sneak along under the bank to a point opposite the cabin. They prepared for the night by making a nest with their blankets under the bank, and arranged for prompt work in the event any attempt was made by the criminal to escape from the stockade.

It might be well here to give a brief description of the Loup River, and the topography of the ground at this point. This river, like the Platte, is a rather wide and shallow stream most of the year. At times the bed of the river is a succession of sand bars, with here and there puddles of water and a current, sometimes on one side of the river and sometimes on the other, which carries the water along sluggishly for a few miles and then wholly disappears, to reappear again below. When the water is as low as this it is possible to drive across without the water coming to the knees of the horses, yet there is always danger of plunging into a quick-sand hole from which it would be impossible to extricate man or horse. These quick-sand holes are found in the most unexpected places in the river and are shifting in their nature. Many human beings and animals have been buried alive in these quick-sand graves.

When the snow melts in the spring or in a wet season, the Loup becomes a deep and rapid stream, sometimes overflowing its banks. At such times it is impossible to ford it, and no one familiar with its whirlpools and suck-holes would venture upon its turbulent waters in a small boat.

At the time of the tragical occurrences being described in this chapter the Loup contained but little water. There were pools of water as already described here and there, and towards the south bank was a current not more than fifty feet wide. Before bridges were built across the Loup in this vicinity, it was not uncommon for cattlemen to ford the river at this point. Because of this fact a ranch was established here which for many years was known as the "Ford Ranch." After the ranch passed into the hands of

its present owner and was merged into his other ranch it was known as Moore's Bottom Ranch. The cabin and stockade of the ranch were located about three hundred yards from the river bank, and were protected by the "breaks" of the river which arose considerably above the cabin and described a semi-circle. For this reason the cabin and stockade were poorly located for successful defense against an attacking force.

"What sort of men have we got to deal with?" asked Mr. Van Kirk of his companion.

"Bad—the whole outfit," he answered. "I used to work for Moore and I know the whole lot. Moore wouldn't have any but bad men very long on his ranch."

"What do you mean by bad men?" asked Mr. Van Kirk, noticing the emphasis on the word "bad."

"On the range it means men who are on the shoot and don't care much who they shoot," replied the man. "All of them fellers in there come up the trail, and most of 'em has killed his man."

"Pretty desperate men I should say," answered Mr. Van Kirk.

"You bet yer sweet life," he replied. "They'll give us a hot brush if we tackle 'em. If any comes out here to-night we must git the drop on 'em or they'll wing us sure."

Mr. Van Kirk liked the courage and candor of the young man, notwithstanding he lacked culture and constantly murdered the King's English. He showed the right kind of mettle when he volunteered to go with Mr. Van Kirk, and from that moment he was well established in the kindly regard of that gentleman. Although he had known him but a few hours he had complete confidence in his courage and his loyalty. It was not long till he had ample evidence of the young man's worthiness of the estimate he had placed upon him.

CHAPTER XV.

A RUSH FOR THE RIVER.

About midnight three men could be distinctly silhouetted against the stockade. They had come out of the wide gate of the enclosure and each was leading a horse. They entered a shallow sand-draw a little down the river from the stockade, and it was apparent to Van Kirk and his companion that they would either attempt to ford the river or, under the cover of the bank, attempt to escape in that way.

Mr. Van Kirk and the young man got their arms ready, and prepared for whatever might happen. Mr. Van Kirk addressed the young man and said:

"I have not learned your name."

"My name is Hank Miller," he replied, "but they call me 'Black Hank' on account of my dark complexion."

"Hank," said Mr. Van Kirk, "if anything happens to me to-night, I would like to have you take possession of my watch and a pocket-book you will find in the pockets of my vest and deliver them to Mr. Grafton."

"I'll do what you say, sir," answered the young man, "but I don't believe anything will happen to yer so I'll have to do that."

"I trust not, but one cannot tell," responded Mr. Van Kirk.

The three men by this time had reached the mouth of the draw, and were not more than twenty yards from where the two men were concealed.

"It's a d— dangerous undertaking in the dark," said one of the three men, "but if we can keep in a line with the bunch of cottonwood trees on the other bank, we'll make it all right."

At this they all peered in the direction of the opposite bank as if to locate the bunch of trees.

"I can't make 'em out," said one, "but when we get to the water it'll be all right. We can see the trees from there, but no feller can tell about the d— quick-sand holes. If we drop into one of them we're gone, and it would have been better to fight her out agin the whole State."

"That's what I'm afraid of," interposed another, "but I see no other way out of it. I'll lead the way, and if I drop into a quick-sand pit you can pull me out by the lariat tied around me. Don't get too near me no matter what happens. I'd be in favor now of going up to the bridge and take chances on a fight with the sheriff's men, but I don't want you fellows to take any chances of that kind on my account."

"Go anyways you please, boss, and we'll foller yer if we have to fight the whole darn gang," said one of the other men, "but I reckon we can make the ford if we are careful. That's the quickest way to git to the station. If we make it you'll be out of the way before the boys surrender the fort."

"Well," said the man addressed as boss, "mount your horses and we'll make the run. If it wasn't for my hand," continued the man, "I'd have more confidence, but as it is I can't handle my horse and the gun at the same time if it becomes necessary to shoot."

"Never mind that, Mr. Moore," replied one of the men, "we'll handle the guns; you look out for your horse and keep your eye on the cottonwoods."

"Follow me," said the man in the lead who had been addressed as Mr. Moore, and they headed their horses for the bed of the river.

They had not advanced far when Mr. Van Kirk shouted:

"Halt!"

The challenge had no sooner been made than the two men in the rear began to "pump" their guns in the direction from which they had heard the challenge. Mr. Van Kirk and "Black Hank" returned the fire, and being able

to take fairly good aim, emptied two of the saddles. The rear horse also reeled and fell, and the riderless horse broke and ran down the river. The man in the lead quickly disappeared in the direction of the bed of the river. Mr. Van Kirk and his companion fired a few shots after the fleeing man, but thought it prudent to give their particular attention to the two men lying on the ground. "Black Hank" suggested that they might be "playin' 'possum."

"It is possible they are," said Mr. Van Kirk, "and we would better hold our guns on them until we are satisfied on that point."

The prostrate men, however, lay as still as death, and after the horse had made a few convulsive kicks, it, too, lay still.

Hearing the firing, the sheriff at once concluded that an attempt had been made by Moore to escape, and that Mr. Van Kirk and the man with him had fired on him. He gave orders for his men to open fire on the cabin and stockade, and to keep it up at least a half-hour, while he would take two men and endeavor to reach the scene of the shooting. With true soldierly instinct, the sheriff believed that by firing on the stockade it would cause a diversion in favor of Mr. Van Kirk and "Black Hank."

The sheriff and his men had reached the bank of the river and were hurrying down to the two men, when they met "Black Hank," who had been ordered by Mr. Van Kirk to report what had happened, and to ask for re-enforcements. The three hurried on and were soon with Mr. Van Kirk, who was keeping a sharp eye on the two prostrate men.

The sheriff and Mr. Van Kirk held a whispered conversation, in which it was decided not to make a move until daylight.

"I wish we had thought of placing a guard at the bridge above and to send a couple of men over the bridge and to a point opposite the stockade," said Mr. Van Kirk. "Had

we done that, the man who escaped would probably be captured on the other side of the river."

"That is just what I did," replied the sheriff, "after you left us."

"Good," responded Mr. Van Kirk. "I want to congratulate you on your splendid management of this whole affair."

The sheriff noticed that Mr. Van Kirk's voice was a little weak and tremulous, noticeably unlike what it was in the evening, and he asked him the cause of it.

"I think," said Mr. Van Kirk, "that I have been wounded in my leg just above the knee. My trousers leg seems moist, and the lower part of my leg feels numb. When I discovered that I had been hit, I took my handkerchief and made a tourniquet and ligated my leg as best I could above the wound. But I don't think it amounts to much."

The sheriff thought differently and began to feel alarmed on account of it. He felt of the limb and to his horror the trousers leg was thoroughly saturated with blood. He concluded that the man was much worse off than he was willing to admit, and he proposed to him that he allow himself to be removed to the upper picket post where the wound could be examined by a light. After some persuasion, Mr. Van Kirk yielded and allowed himself to be supported by two of the men, who actually had to carry him a part of the way to the ridge. An examination by an improvised light showed a bad flesh wound just above the knee. The light also enabled them to see that Mr. Van Kirk was very pale from loss of blood and suffering from shock. He was given whiskey and water, and the wound was washed and bandaged with cloths saturated with the liquor. It was proposed to take him at once to Mr. Grafton's ranch, but Mr. Van Kirk would not listen to any such proposition.

"I'll feel better in a little while," said Mr. Van Kirk, "and if there is going to be any fighting done I want to be here to do my share."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TRAGEDIES OF A NIGHT.

Daylight finally came and the weary watchers were thankful enough. The two men who had been watched half the night because it was thought they might be "playing 'possum" were found to be stiff in death. Both had been pierced through the body and evidently were unconscious when they fell from their horses. The horse had fallen upon his rider and pinned him to the ground. It was truly a ghastly sight. The men were covered with blankets, and the pickets resumed their place under the bank to await developments at the stockade. They had not long to wait, for within a half-hour after daylight a man left the stockade carrying a flag of truce. He ascended the hill and was permitted to advance to within a few yards of one of the picket posts, when he was ordered to halt.

"What is your wish?" said the captain of the squad.

"We want to give up," he said.

He was taken in charge and the two detectives and four other men rode down to the stockade. They found the door wide open and nineteen men unarmed within the enclosure ready to surrender. The boss of the outfit was not among them, and the man who had been recognized by the sheriff the day before as the "bad man from Texas," was also missing.

"You'll find our guns all in the cabin," said one of the outfit, "and we're ready to go with the sheriff without any more talk."

The detectives went through the cabin and looked in every nook and corner of the stockade, and satisfied themselves that the man they were after had made good his escape. To be sure of it, however, the hounds were turned loose and they bounded into the stockade and then into the cabin and out again without paying any attention to the men who were in there, and took a trail leading direct to the river.

When the men who had been watching the stockade from the river bank saw the man ascending the hill with a flag of truce, they immediately started on the trail made by the horse ridden by the man who escaped during the night. The hounds soon overtook them on this trail and led the way to the narrow current which was nearer the south than the north bank. Over the sand they went, plunging through pools of water, and on until they reached the main channel. Here they stopped. They ran up and down the edge of the water several times, and then threw their noses into the air, as much as to say: "We have lost the trail." They whirled instantly and took the back track and returned to the stockade. The keeper of the hounds explained that the scent must have run out before the dogs reached the water, else they would have plunged in and swam to the other side, expecting to find the trail on the opposite bank.

The sheriff took possession of the rifles and revolvers belonging to the men who had surrendered the stockade, and loaded them in a wagon and under guard started them for Mr. Grafton's ranch.

Presently two men were seen on the south bank of the river approaching the channel from that side. They were soon made out to be the party sent around by the bridge to intercept any attempting to escape from the stockade from the ford. When they had reached a point as near the channel as seemed practicable, they were observed pointing to some object lying partly in the water and partly in the sand. The sheriff, with a number of his men, ventured down to the channel, and got as near the object as possible. Finally it was made out to be a horse that had succeeded in swimming the channel and had struggled in vain to climb up the yielding sand that formed the opposite bank. The animal was buried in the sand and water with the exception of a part of the head and neck and the pommel of the saddle. A lariat was attached to the pommel of the saddle and led back to a man who was entirely submerged in the sand and water with the exception of the upper part of his head. It was impossible to get to them, and within

an hour both had been completely buried out of sight by the shifting sands. As neither of the men shot by Mr. Van Kirk and "Black Hank" was Mr. Moore, and as there were but three escaped from the stockade, it was concluded that the man drowned in attempting to cross the channel was the man they were after. He had escaped from the stockade only to be engulfed in the quick-sands of the Loup.

The bodies of the men who had been shot were carried up to the stockade where their companions were, and who admitted that they were the remains of the foreman and the desperate character the sheriff had recognized the day before. His former comrades, with the exception of one, were much affected by the scene. When they were told of the fate of Moore, some of them shed tears, and all evinced signs of sorrow, except the one man already referred to, which showed that they had a real attachment for him.

The sheriff took the young man who had exhibited no feeling at the sight of his dead comrades, and who seemed to have no regret at the fate of Moore, to one side for the purpose of getting from him a statement as to what had occurred in the stockade during the night.

"My young fellow," said the sheriff, "I judge from your conduct that you take very little interest in the death of Mr. Moore and the two men who were shot last night."

"You're right, I don't care a nickel for 'em," answered the young man. "I was forced to stay with 'em or I would have left before you and your outfit came to the ranch. They threatened to kill me if I left the stockade. Half of the outfit ought to be killed."

"Where is the man known as Moore now?" asked the sheriff.

"I don't know," replied the young man, "unless he is in a quick-sand hole in the river, where you seem to think he is. He and the boss and 'Bloody Sam' left the stockade last night about twelve o'clock, intending to make a break for the other side of the river, by the cottonwood ford."

"When did Moore come to the stockade?" asked the sheriff.

"Day before yesterday, about two o'clock in the morning," replied the young man.

"Do you know whether one of his hands was wounded?" asked the sheriff.

"Yes," replied the young fellow, "he had two fingers shot off in a fight over a girl, so he said."

The sheriff was satisfied with the identity of the man Moore, and had no doubt left that he was the one who attempted to enter Mr. Grafton's house, and was now buried in the quick-sands of the river. He stated his conclusions to his men, and they set about getting ready to leave the stockade.

RETURN OF THE POSSE—ALARMING CONDITION OF MR. VAN KIRK.

The teams and wagons belonging to the ranch, and those which had brought provisions and blankets and ammunition to the sheriff's posse, were got ready and loaded with camp equipage, the prisoners and the dead bodies and started for Mr. Grafton's ranch. The light spring wagon belonging to the ranch was used as an ambulance for the removal of Mr. Van Kirk, whose wounds had become painful, and the one in his leg so much inflamed and the limb so swollen that he was unable to walk even to the wagon, and had to be carried to it and lifted in. He was very pale and very weak, but was uncomplaining and cheerful. He expressed great satisfaction at the result, but could not conceal the fact that he was very much worried over the two men who had been shot by "Black Hank" and himself. The sheriff assured him that he had done his simple duty, and in that way sought to quiet whatever of compunction he had on account of the killing.

When the cavalcade reached the Grafton ranch there were quite a number of people gathered from neighboring farms to meet it and to learn the particulars of the capture. When Mr. Van Kirk was carried from the wagon to the house, it was the first the Graftons knew of his having been wounded the second time, and Mrs. Grafton was prevented from fainting only by a generous use of smelling

salts and stimulants, while Mr. Grafton shed tears and gave expressions of sorrow as if the man had been his own son. Virginia was very much moved, but maintained a degree of calmness and presence of mind that seemed to be peculiarly hers under exciting conditions. She immediately dispatched a messenger for Doctor Kingsman, their family physician, and set about dressing the wounds of Mr. Van Kirk with antiseptics in a manner to indicate that she had not studied physiology and hygiene without purpose. She improvised a small tank of a tin bucket, which she suspended over the wounded limb and caused a small stream of water to trickle on the wound in order to reduce the inflammation, and to prepare it for such treatment as the surgeon might adopt on his arrival. She re-dressed the arm which had become very much inflamed and swollen since it was dressed before he joined the posse to capture the stockade. Mrs. Grafton, who had regained her self-possession sufficiently to assist Virginia, under the direction of the latter, had prepared a milk punch and some tempting food for the wounded man, who occasionally endeavored to impress his friends with the idea that his wounds were of little consequence and were not giving him any special pain, but it was quite evident from the expression of his eyes and his pinched face that he was suffering more than he was willing to admit.

The doctor came post-haste and gave the wounded man immediate attention. He found the patient suffering from shock, and really in a very dangerous condition. He informed Mr. Grafton and his family that Mr. Van Kirk needed the very best of care to save his life. The wounded man was told plainly that his condition was extremely critical. He hardly realized that such was the case, and would not admit it to be so, yet he signified his willingness to place himself in the hands of the doctor, and under the kindly administrations of Mrs. Grafton and her daughter.

"I regret," said Mr. Van Kirk, addressing himself to Mrs. Grafton and Virginia, "that anything has happened to bring additional worry and work into your life, but I sincerely trust it will not be of long duration."

"We hope you will not allow any thought that you are a burden to us to cause you the least uneasiness, Mr. Van Kirk," answered Mrs. Grafton. "Under the circumstances it is our duty to care for you, and, furthermore, since you must be nursed, we are glad that it is our privilege to nurse you."

The excitement in the community ran high for days after the tragical events described, and Mr. Van Kirk and "Black Hank" were the heroes talked of now quite as much as had been Miss Grafton after the blizzard.

Mr. Van Kirk expressed a desire that "Black Hank" should remain on the Grafton ranch and be given comfortable quarters at his expense until his recovery. This was satisfactory to Mr. and Mrs. Grafton, and when this plan, with Mr. Grafton's approval, was submitted to "Black Hank," he went into ecstasies of joy over it.

"I just want'er stay with that man all my life," exclaimed "Black Hank." "He's as brave a man as ever I see under fire, and he's as kind-hearted as a woman. I've larnt to love him, and I ain't knowed him more'n two days."

The wounded man received every attention possible, yet his case grew worse and worse until the physician, who now remained at the ranch much of his time, had grave doubts of his patient's recovery. The best physicians of the county were called into consultation, and they agreed that the chances of recovery were so slight that if the patient had any important business which needed attention he had better attend to it at once.

The Graftons were greatly alarmed. Virginia was at the patient's bedside unceasingly, and endeavored by every means in her power to encourage and reassure him.

"He must not die," she said to her mother in a determined yet supplicating voice. "We must save him! We must save him!" This was the first time Virginia evinced signs of breaking down. She rallied, however, and brushing away the tears which came unbidden to her eyes, she repeated the words again, "We must save him!"

Mr. Van Kirk was gently told that his case was so serious

that he had better send for any relatives or friends he might desire to see.

He called Virginia to him and gave her the names of his mother and two sisters, and the name of the family physician, to whom he dictated a telegram asking him to charter a special car and fetch his mother and sisters with the least possible delay. The telegram was hardly finished when "Black Hank" on a fleet horse was bearing it to the nearest telegraph office. An answer came back at once that they would be with him as soon as a special train could take them. A telegram from his mother said:

"Be brave, my boy, be brave for your mother's sake. She will pray to God to spare you to her, and He will."

THEIR LIPS MET IN HOLY ACKNOWLEDGMENT.

After the message had been dispatched, Mr. Van Kirk turned his face full towards Virginia and asked her to come nearer to him. He took her hand in his and said:

"Pardon me for this liberty, but I desire to say to you now that I came all the way from my home in New Jersey to tell you that I love you and earnestly desire to make you my wife. The more I have seen of you the more I have loved you; and if you esteem me worthy and consent, you will make my life, if prolonged, happier than it has ever been, and if I die my last moments will be hallowed and glorified by the thought that you love me."

He looked her calmly in the eyes and paused for an answer.

Virginia placed her other hand on his and returned his gaze sweetly and lovingly, and simply said:

"It shall be as you wish," and their lips met in a holy acknowledgment that they were one in soul.

"Thank you, dearest, thank you," he answered as his face lighted up and a new strength came into his eyes, "I am unworthy of you, unworthy of your great love, but if God spares my life it will be devoted to your happiness, and in proving to Him my gratitude for being spared."

"As soon as my mother and sisters arrive," he said after a few seconds of reflection, "we shall be married if it is

your pleasure. But lest I may not be alive when they come, I desire to dictate a codicil to my will in your favor; for I consider the tie that unites us quite as sacred as any ceremony could make it, and that you are as much entitled to a portion of my property as if you had been formally pronounced my wife."

The physician was called to the bedside and was requested to reduce to writing the codicil as it should be dictated by Mr. Van Kirk. When finished the new provision in the will read:

"To Virginia Grafton, the one woman whom I have loved and promised to marry, five hundred thousand dollars."

Four days later the special car bearing his mother and sisters and the family physician of the Van Kirks, with two eminent specialists from New York, arrived at the station, and was quickly side-tracked. Mr. Grafton and "Black Hank" were there with a carriage to convey them speedily to the ranch.

The meeting between Mr. Van Kirk and his mother and sisters was most affecting, and would be difficult to describe in words. After embracing her son, the mother sank involuntarily on her knees in prayer that he might be spared to her, and thanking the Father in heaven that she found him still alive and conscious. The sisters evinced a love for their brother that was touching and beautiful.

The old family physician, who regarded Mr. Van Kirk as one of his children for the reason that he had presided at his birth, shed tears of thankfulness because they had found him alive, and promised "his boy" that he should get well, and that they would soon take him back with them.

The arrival of the mother and sisters, and the new treatment prescribed by the specialists, had a most potent and electrifying effect on the patient, and within a few days the specialists gave substantial hope that he would recover.

Before Mrs. Van Kirk and her daughters knew anything of the engagement between Mr. Van Kirk and Virginia, they had been completely captivated by her.

"We love the dear girl," they said to Mr. Van Kirk, "she is sweetness itself; an angel of goodness and helpful-

ness. We owe her a debt for her attentions to you that can never be paid."

"Virginia says the debt has been paid already," he answered. "Whenever I refer to the debt I owe her for her goodness and that of her father and mother, she insists that the balance is on the other side of the ledger," and he made a feeble attempt to laugh.

His mother cautioned him and shook her finger commandingly to emphasize her desire that he should not exert himself.

"I will look serious, then, dear mother," said the patient, "if that is in better form and more helpful to a wounded man," and he gave another suggestive laugh.

The mother and sisters looked at each other and then at the patient gravely and wonderingly, as much as to ask, "What do you mean?"

"I will tell you something, mother," he said, "if you and sisters will promise me, 'pon honor, that you will say nothing to the doctors about it," and he made a comical effort to look roguish.

"We promise, dearest," they answered almost in concert, and then eagerly awaited the revelation he seemed ready to make.

"Virginia promised to become my wife," he said as some color came into his pale face and his eyes became fairly luminous, "as soon as you came if the doctors would permit it."

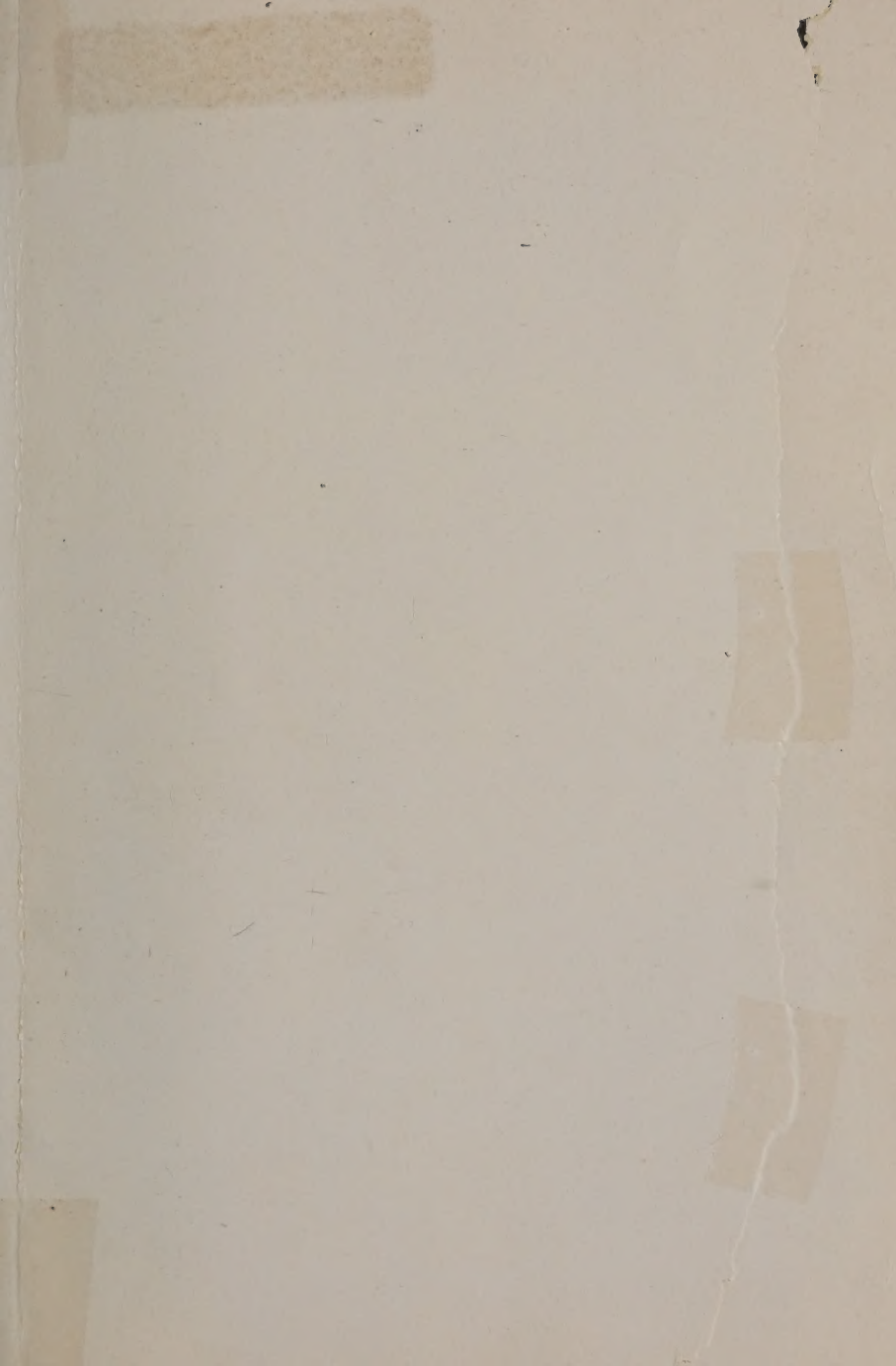
"But how is the consent of the doctors to be obtained," they asked, "if we are held to our promise to say nothing about it to them?"

"I will release you from that promise," he replied, and a sweet smile passed over his countenance, "on the one condition that you will immediately lay the matter before them and get their consent."

"This is the work of angels," exclaimed the mother.

"Isn't it romantic!" said the sisters.

The promise was kept, and a happier bridal party, which included Mr. and Mrs. Grafton, and "Black Hank," never inaugurated a honeymoon under happier or more auspicious circumstances.





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